

**MEN'S PERCEPTIONS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES OF  
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A QUALITATIVE  
APPROACH USING INTERPRETATIVE  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

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## **Abstract**

This study is aimed at exploring in detail men's perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships. According to Relate's (2009, 2010) statistics, in the United Kingdom there is a rise in the number of male clients who present themselves for relationship counselling. There is consequently growing interest among counselling psychologists to understand romantic relationships from a male perspective. Critical realist epistemology underpins this study and is in accord with counselling psychology - both place emphasis upon uncovering subjective truths. A review of the literature on men and romantic relationships suggests that this subject has been predominantly studied from a 'natural science', positivist and quantitative framework. From a critical realist position, a gap in the literature appears to be that men's subjective experiences and personal perceptions of romantic relationships have not been fully identified and understood in their own terms. This is addressed in this study. Using a qualitative approach seven heterosexual men were interviewed. The participants were predominantly white, British, university educated and employed professionals, aged 30-39, with experience of a romantic relationship. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings suggest that for these seven participants, romantic relationships were understood and experienced firstly in terms of why such relationships were established and the factors that contributed to the initial encounters. Secondly, participants identified several elements which they felt were significant in sustaining their relationships. Finally, participants noted a number of salient factors that contributed to the breakdown and/or ending of their romantic relationships. The findings that emerged from the study emphasise that this particular sample of men made sense of their romantic relationships in complex,

specific, and varied ways. The implication of this for practice is that it reminds counselling psychologists that their engagement with clients should be collaborative, whilst emphasising and respecting their subjective experiences, feelings and meanings in their own terms – fundamental components of counselling psychology philosophy. The intricate, subjective and diverse ways in which the participants made sense of their romantic relationships have provided new and richer insights into this area and make a distinctive contribution to counselling psychology and relationship theory.

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## **Table of Abbreviations**

DP	Discursive Psychology
FDA	Foucauldian Discourse Analysis
GT	Grounded Theory
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
ONS	Office of National Statistics
UK	United Kingdom

## **1. Introduction**

In this section I will illustrate how I became interested in wanting to understand romantic relationships from a male perspective. I will present the rationale for investigating this topic followed by an explicit presentation of the research aim. I will then provide an overview of how the current research contributes to counselling psychology. The epistemological position underpinning the research will be presented through a discussion of the philosophical and methodological issues and debates in the field of counselling psychology. Finally, this section will provide a brief presentation of issues concerned with reflexivity.

### **1.1 Origins of the Current Study**

My personal interest in understanding romantic relationships from a male perspective emanated from my own experiences of romantic relationships with men and the significance they hold in my life. Additionally, my preconception about men and romantic relationships was that they were misrepresented in the literature and more generally in the wider social/cultural context. My perception of general stereotypes, the media, and the raft of popular self-help books targeted particularly for a female audience led me to believe that men were being portrayed as uninterested about their emotional lives and relationships, 'unable to do' relationships, and being emotionally illiterate. Through my training as a counselling psychologist I became aware of some of the discrepancies between this and men's lived experiences of romantic relationships. In practice, I found that romantic relationships were of great importance to my male clients, and these were almost always referred to in therapy. Consequently, I felt that it was important to offer men the opportunity to voice their own views and experiences of romantic relationships without making any prior assumptions.

## 1.2 Rationale

‘Romantic relationships’ is a topic of interest and importance to counselling psychology as they are understood to be considerably significant in most individuals’ lives (Street, 2003; Reis & Rusbult, 2004; Leone & Hawkins, 2006). They exert a powerful impact on human psychological health and well-being, and influence much of an individual’s personal view of the ‘self’ (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Woolfe, Dryden & Strawbridge, 2003). Additionally, counselling psychologists are interested in understanding romantic relationships as currently in the United Kingdom (UK) there is a vast increase in clients/couples seeking counselling to address issues that are rooted in their experiences of romantic relationships (McLeod, 2003a). This could be partly linked to the significant decrease in the duration of relationships compared to 25 years ago as 45-50% of marriages now end in divorce in the UK (ONS, 2008).

Understanding the experiences of romantic relationships from a heterosexual male perspective seems highly appropriate given that there is currently a rise in the number of male clients who present themselves for counselling, particularly relationship counselling (Brooks & Good, 2001). Relate’s<sup>1</sup> past statistics show that women were more commonly accessing psychological help with regards to relationship issues (Relate, 2009, 2010). However, currently nearly half of their clients (43%) are now male, with the majority being heterosexual (Relate, 2009, 2010).

Several perspectives explaining men’s behaviour and experiences in romantic relationships dominate existing literature. They mostly derive from a ‘natural science’ model (Winstead, Derlega & Rose, 1997; Wood, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004) which

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<sup>1</sup> Relate is a charitable organization operating throughout the UK to provide cheap and accessible counselling for individuals and couples about relationship issues (Relate, 2010).

allows for the prediction and control of human behaviour and are thus inherently deterministic (Woolf et al., 2003). Furthermore, although perspectives have been offered that are considered less deterministic, they seem to have a reductionist view of masculinity in romantic relationships as being exclusively connected with having power over women. The present study highlights that a limitation of these perspectives seems to be that they fail to acknowledge and understand fully the complexity, specificity and diversity of men's individual subjective experiences of romantic relationships. Furthermore, empirical findings in this field predominantly derive from a quantitative positivist framework (Allen & Walker, 2000; Kashy & Levesque, 2000), and appear to make the assumption that men will experience and perceive romantic relationships (and other relationship phenomena) in a static and universal way. This points to the need for more research exploring men's subjective experiences and personal perceptions of romantic relationships. It seems highly important to address this gap in the literature given that counselling psychology emphasises the validity and importance of engaging with subjective experience, feelings and meanings (Woolfe et al., 2003). (See section 2 for a more detailed rationale for this study)

### **1.3 Aim of the Current Study**

The aim of this study was to explore men's lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships using a qualitative approach. This was in view of the importance and relevance of understanding the area of men and romantic relationships to counselling psychology, as well as contributing to bridging the gap that appears in the literature. The method of analysis used to achieve this aim was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research approach concerned with

exploring in detail how people make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

#### **1.4 Contribution to Counselling Psychology**

An exploration of men's lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships seemed highly relevant to counselling psychology which emphasizes the importance of engaging with subjective experience, feelings and meanings, and respecting these as valid in their own terms (Woolfe et al., 2003). The findings of this study illuminate and complement existing theory and research in the field of men and relationships, as well as contribute to the development of new insights. These insights could enhance a counselling psychologist's understanding of this topic and could become part of the literature that supports their practice. This research could also contribute to a trainee and qualified counselling psychologist's practice by encouraging them to reflect on and adapt their own practice when working with male clients and relationship issues. Finally, this research may provide new insights and enhanced understanding of men and romantic relationships for agencies devoted to working specifically with clients/couples with relationship issues. Research concerned with subjective experience relates well to the philosophy of counselling psychology, but seems to be in a minority within the wider domain of psychological research including the area of men and relationships, which is dominated by quantitative work rooted in philosophical positivism (Allen & Walker, 2000; Woolfe et al., 2003). The present study therefore contributes to the growing number of non-positivist research which values subjective experience and meaning as valid components of scientific knowledge (Woolfe et al., 2003). (See section 5 for a more detailed account of this study's contribution to Counselling Psychology)

### **1.5 The Philosophy of Science and Research Paradigms in Psychology**

The philosophy of science refers to the conceptual roots underpinning the quest for knowledge (Ponterotto, 2005). Incorporated within this philosophy are assumptions regarding ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), and methodology (the process and procedures of research) (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincon, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005). These philosophical and methodological assumptions constitute a research paradigm which guides researchers in their work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The main philosophical and methodological issues and debates in the field of counselling psychology will firstly be discussed in order to map the philosophical underpinnings of this study.

The model of science developed from the 'Enlightenment' originated in the mid eighteenth century and marked the beginning of 'modernity' which insisted on reason and rationality as the basis of knowledge (Ponterotto, 2005). This model was rooted in the philosophy of positivism (Ponterotto, 2005). Ontologically, positivism is a branch of philosophical realism (Ponterotto, 2005). Realism asserts that there exists one true, knowable, identifiable, and measurable reality, and that universals exist independently of thought (Ponterotto, 2005). Epistemologically, positivism assumes that concepts or phenomena are defined by empirical categories, and that there is a straightforward relationship between those concepts or phenomena, and people's perception and understanding of it (Cacioppo, Semin & Berntson, 2004; Willig, 2008). It also assumes that there is uniformity of nature in time and space, and that large samples suppress idiosyncrasies in data, and reveal general causes or the ultimate laws of nature (Cacioppo et al., 2004; Willig, 2008). A positivist epistemology implies that the goal of research is to produce objective knowledge and that there is no involvement of the

researcher in the production of this knowledge (Ponterotto, 2005; Willig, 2008).

Methodologically, positivist studies adhere to quantitative, hypothetico-deductive approaches (Willig, 2008). This involves systematic observation and description of phenomena contextualised within a theory, the presentation, testing, and verification of hypotheses, and the use of statistical testing and interpretation (McGrath & Johnson, 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2004).

The positivist model of science was pre-eminent in the development of modern psychology which had its origins in the second half of the nineteenth century (Woolfe et al., 2003). The emphasis on objectivity and observability favoured a focus on behaviour, rather than subjective experience (Woolfe et al., 2003). Nevertheless, there were those who questioned the appropriateness of using the same methods to study both the natural and human world, namely thinkers from a humanistic psychology and phenomenological tradition which included counselling psychology (Woolfe et al., 2003). They argued that the subject matter of psychology is crucially different from that of the natural sciences and requires different methods of study, namely a 'human science' approach (Woolfe et al., 2003). Whilst the natural science model was inherently deterministic as it assumed the existence of discoverable laws that could constitute a body of knowledge allowing the prediction and control of human behaviour, human sciences viewed human beings as self conscious, reflective and self-determined, were concerned with subjective experience and meaning, and linked to a theory of *understanding* (Woolfe et al., 2003).

Although the positivist paradigm has been the dominant force in psychology for the last 150 years (McGrath & Johnson, 2003; Ponterotto, 2005), the developments discussed resulted in a shift away from traditional quantitative approaches to research to an



increase in qualitative approaches (McLeod, 2003b). Qualitative approaches offer the generation of new, richer insights, and can open up the meanings of areas of social life that were formerly not completely understood, contributing to the growth of understanding (McLeod, 2001). Qualitative approaches are concerned with the quality and texture of experience rather than the identification of cause-effect relationships (Willig, 2008). Unlike quantitative approaches, they tend not to work with variables that are defined by the researcher before the research process begins as they are concerned more with in-depth exploration, description and interpretation of the subjective meanings attributed to concepts, phenomena, and experience by the research participant themselves (Willig, 2008). Given that qualitative methods are concerned with the detailed examination of individuals' subjective meanings and experiences, in contrast to quantitative approaches, they tend to use relatively smaller participant samples (Willig, 2008).

Qualitative approaches commonly adopt research paradigms which are rooted in philosophies ranging from realism to relativism (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000; Willig, 2008). As discussed, realism accepts the theory of 'truth' in which the world is largely knowable and objectively identifiable (Madill et al., 2000). Qualitative research of this persuasion therefore generates knowledge which captures what is 'really' going on (in someone's life or mind) (Willig, 2008). From this stance, methods which aim to develop an explanatory level account of social and psychological processes are typically employed e.g. Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and the researcher is believed to be able to study their participants without influencing them and vice versa (Madill et al., 2000; Willig, 2008).

Alternatively, relativism, or ‘radical constructionism’ rejects concepts such as ‘truth’ and asserts that multiple realities can be constructed (Madill et al., 2000; Willig, 2008). From this stance, it is believed that perception and experience is never a direct reflection of the environment, but rather it is mediated socially, historically, culturally and linguistically (Madill et al., 2000; Willig, 2008). Therefore, it is believed that there are ‘knowledges’ rather than ‘knowledge’ (Ponterotto, 2005; Willig, 2008). From this perspective, language in social interaction is placed centre stage as it is considered to construct<sup>2</sup>, rather than simply describe reality (Burr, 2003). Relativist research methods are thus concerned not with the experience itself, but how an individual talks about a particular experience within a particular context (or the performative/functional nature of language) e.g. Discursive Psychology (DP) (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Furthermore, constructionist methods are concerned with exploring the ‘discursive resources’, that is, the availability of a particular way of talking about an issue within a culture, and the way this prescribes what people can experience e.g. Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (Willig, 2008). The socially constructed nature of knowledge also means that the dynamic interaction between researcher and participant is central in capturing the reality of the participant (Ponterotto, 2005).

There is a range of positions in-between the ‘realist and relativist continuum’ (Willig, 2008). This includes the critical realist position which shares the realist assertion that there are stable and enduring features of reality that exist independently of human conceptualisation (Bhaskar, 1978; Finlay, 2006; Willig, 2008). Unlike realism, critical realism contends that differences in the way an individual perceives and experiences

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<sup>2</sup> The words people choose to describe a particular experience always construct a particular version of that experience; therefore, the same event can be described in many different ways by the same person in different contexts (Burr, 2003; Willig, 2008).

concepts and phenomenon are considered possible as they depend upon an individual's personal beliefs and expectations (Bhaskar, 1978; Bunge, 1993; Finlay, 2006). The way phenomena are experienced and perceived is thus always viewed as fluid and subjective (Bhaskar, 1978; Bunge, 1993; Finlay, 2006). Consequently, critical realism admits an inherent subjectivity in the production of knowledge, which is not invalidated by conflicting alternative perspectives (Watkins, 1994; Finlay, 2006). From this stance, methods are used to provide a rich and comprehensive description of a phenomenon or experience from the participant's perspective, which communicates to readers a sense of quality and texture e.g. IPA (Smith, 1996; Willig, 2008). Furthermore, although critical realism shares the realist ambition to gain a better understanding of what is 'really' going on in the world, it also acknowledges that the data the researcher gathers may not provide direct access to this reality (Willig, 2008).

### ***1.5.1 Epistemological Position of this Study***

Faced with competing research paradigms, how do we choose? Finlay (2006) proposed that researchers must adopt a position to which they can relate. She suggested that this involves reflecting on personal values, beliefs and interests, as well as academic/disciplinary demands. Consequently, reflecting the researcher's personal and professional view, the epistemological position underpinning this study is critical realism. Critical realism which asserts that reality independently exists with people's experiences and perceptions of this being subjective (Bhaskar, 1978; Bunge, 1993), seems in accord with counselling psychology which is phenomenologically focused and concerned with understanding people's inner worlds and uncovering subjective truths (Woolfe et al., 2003). Additionally, they both regard first person accounts as valid in its own terms, and do not assume the automatic superiority of any one way of knowing or

experiencing (Bhaskar, 1978; Bunge, 1993; Woolfe, et al., 2003). With this in mind, a qualitative approach to research seemed most relevant to the researcher since it is concerned with the detailed exploration, description and interpretation of the subjective experience and meanings given by research participants themselves (Willig, 2008). The method of analysis used for this study was IPA since it is a qualitative research approach that is compatible with critical realist epistemology (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005; Finlay, 2006), and is concerned with an in-depth examination of people's lived experiences and personal perceptions. (See section 3 for further detail on all that has been discussed in this subsection)

## **1.6 Reflexivity**

Qualitative approaches acknowledge that the researcher influences the research, and so reflexivity is a criterion for quality evaluation in qualitative work (Willig, 2008).

Reflexivity encourages researchers to reflect upon and make explicit the ways in which their own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, thoughts and feelings are implicated in the research (Willig 2008). I acknowledge that the origins of this study discussed in section 1.1 as well as other personal thoughts and feelings about the topic under investigation have impacted upon the research process. Although my aim is to explore the lived experiences and personal perceptions of romantic relationships from a male perspective, I also recognise that my existing understanding of this topic will inevitably influence the whole research process, including its focus, philosophical underpinnings, analysis and discussion of the study. (See sections 3.6 and 5.3 for more on reflexivity)

## **1.7 Summary**

This section provided an overview of the origins of this study. The rationale for this research was based on the importance of studying this topic and gaps in existing literature. The contribution made to counselling psychology theory and practice by addressing this gap was also presented. This section also illustrated the main epistemological and methodological issues and debates in the field of counselling psychology, allowing the researcher's epistemological position to be mapped. Given the qualitative nature of this study, the section finished with a brief consideration of issues concerning reflexivity.

The next section will provide a critical review of existing literature and empirical findings relevant to the topic of the research. This will provide a fuller illustration of the rationale for this study, presenting a more detailed discussion of the gap in extant literature which has led the researcher to pose the research aim.

## **2. Literature Review**

In this section I will critically review existing theory and empirical findings in the area of heterosexual men and romantic relationships. To begin, I will present the most widely accepted definition of a romantic relationship used in extant literature, followed by a brief history of relationship research. I will then review significant theoretical orientations and empirical findings in the field of men and romantic relationships. The theoretical orientations are the evolutionary psychology orientation, attachment orientation, interdependence orientation, role theory, psychoanalytic theory and the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Theory and research will then be critiqued from a counselling psychology – critical realist perspective, which illustrates the identified gap in existing literature, and the research aim of this study.

### **2.1 Definition of a ‘Romantic Relationship’**

Reis & Rusbult (2004) proposed that the most widely accepted definition of a ‘romantic relationship’ was put forward by Kelley et al., (1983) who asserted that it exists when two people exert strong, frequent, and diverse effects on one another over an extended period of time. In relationship literature, the term ‘romantic relationship’ is often used interchangeably with terms such as close, personal, intimate, and couple/dyadic relationships (Reis & Rusbult, 2004; Simpson & Tran, 2006). Kelley et al., (1983) proposed that a romantic relationship can involve dating, co-habiting, engaged, and married partners.

### **2.2 Brief History of Relationship Research**

The study of romantic relationships began with theorists such as Freud (1917) and Erikson (1950) proposing models of personality which emphasised the importance of

close interpersonal relationships. During the 1960s, theorists studying humanistic psychology began to argue for the ‘art of loving’ (Fromm, 1962), the importance of self disclosure (Jourard, 1964), and the centrality of ‘being love’ (Maslow, 1968). These authors’ claims were based largely on causal observation and case study, not on empirical scientific research (Reis & Rusbult, 2004). During the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, ‘relationship science’ (see section 2.3 for further detail) took a large and valued place in the social sciences (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Feeney, 2006). One of the most significant areas of research during this time focused on the correlation between relationships and health (Reis & Rusbult, 2004).

### **2.3 Theoretical Orientations and Empirical Findings**

Different researchers have approached the study of men and romantic relationships from different theoretical orientations, which means that they identify and emphasise different sorts of processes and causal factors of men’s behaviour in such relationships (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000). In explaining masculinity in close relationships, the theoretical orientations that have proven most prominent in existing literature are the Evolutionary Psychology and Attachment Orientations – often termed as ‘individual’ explanations; the Interdependence Orientation – frequently referred to as an ‘interpersonal’ explanation; Role Theory – often termed a ‘structural’ explanation; Psychoanalytic Theory – referred to as a ‘socialization’ explanation; and the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity – viewed as a ‘constructionist’ explanation (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000; Whitehead, 2002).

Each of these theories will be briefly presented, accompanied with some of the most consistent empirical findings that follow from them, relevant to the field of men and romantic relationships. These empirical findings have emerged predominantly from

quantitative research approaches rooted in positivist philosophy, and belong under the umbrella of ‘relationship science’ and scientific knowledge (Kashy & Levesque, 2000). Such knowledge is based on findings from empirical research and the regularities identified via systematic objective observation and measurement (Kashy & Levesque, 2000). This knowledge is established using methods of measurement that provide objectivity and maximise the probability that findings are interpretable, reliable and valid (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Feeney, 2006). The most common methods used include: self/other-report techniques (participants describe themselves/their partners and their relationships by recording answers to questionnaire items with fixed-response formats); observational techniques (trained raters who typically have no prior knowledge of the relationship or its members make summary judgements or record specific behaviours); and experimental methods (laboratory-based research in which experimenters manipulate certain independent variables to establish whether they cause corresponding changes to one or more dependent variables) (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Feeney, 2006).

### **2.3.1 Individual Explanations**

‘Individual’ explanations are based on the assumption that human behaviour is governed by personal traits, characteristics and dispositions, as well as biologically determined tendencies which are considered as ‘belonging’ to the individual (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000). In existing literature, ‘individual’ theoretical orientations which have proven most prominent in explaining men’s behaviour in relationships are the Evolutionary Psychology Orientation and Attachment Orientation (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000).



### ***2.3.1.1 Evolutionary Psychology Orientation***

One of the most influential explanations that account for gender differences and/or masculinity in relationships is the evolutionary psychology orientation, centred on the biologically based theory that men (and women) have innate qualities i.e. specific genes or hormones, which shape behaviour (Kenrick & Trost, 2000). From this perspective, if a specific human tendency (an impulse to think, feel, or behave in a particular manner) has a genetic basis to the degree that the tendency enhances an individual's 'fitness' i.e. to survive and successfully reproduce one's genes, the tendency will become more prominent over the course of generations (Kenrick & Trost, 1997, 2000).

Two important principles of evolutionary theory are: sexual selection, and parental investment (Kenrick & Trost, 2000). Characteristics are sexually selected when a trait provides an advantage in attracting mates (Kenrick & Trost, 2000). There are two forms of sexual selection: intersexual choice (where a trait gains an advantage because it is attractive to the opposite sex), and intrasexual competition (where a trait gains an advantage because it facilitates an individual to compete with same-sex rivals) (Darwin, 1859; Kenrick & Trost, 2000).

According to the theory of parental investment, females invest more (time and energy) in offspring; therefore they are more selective about choosing mates, and want mates who can provide resources for themselves and their offspring (Trivers, 1972). Males tend to be non-selective about their mates as they can frequently reproduce with little cost and so want mates who are healthy and fertile (Trivers, 1972).

### ***2.3.1.2 Empirical Findings from Evolutionary Psychology***

One of the most significant and enduring empirical findings based on the evolutionary psychology perspective is that males prefer mates who are physically attractive, and that for men, physical attraction is the main cause of relationship initiation, whereas, females prefer mates and will initiate relationships with those who have earning capacity, social status, and dominance (e.g. Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1990; Rajecki, Bledsoe & Rasmussen, 1991; Thiessen, Young, & Burroughs, 1993; Wiederman, 1993; Kenrick, Groth, Trost & Sadalla, 1993). It has also been consistently found that males are associated with competitive behaviour (they must compete with other males to have resources to be attractive to women and provide for their offspring), whereas females are associated with relationship-oriented behaviour (they must nurture their limited number of offspring) (e.g. Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth & Trost, 1990; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick & Trost, 2000).

### ***2.3.1.3 Attachment Orientation***

Another ‘individual’ explanation which has proven significant in explaining men’s behaviour in relationships is the attachment orientation (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000). The basic assumption of attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), is that, because of their extreme immaturity at birth, human infants can survive only if an adult is available and willing to provide protection and care. Thus, humans are born with a behavioural system to promote proximity to, and the development of the kind of bond with a protector/caregiver needed to ensure survival, and that separation from those attachment figures can cause heightened anxiety and distress – tendencies believed to be retained in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980).

According to Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980) attachment theory, the quality of infant-caregiver interactions shapes the way in which children process information about themselves, their attachment figures and the social world. He proposed that over time, early interaction patterns crystallize into more general styles of thinking about and relating to attachment figures – referred to as 'internal working models'/attachment styles. Once established, these internal working models guide cognition, affect and behaviour in attachment relationships in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980).

#### ***2.3.1.4 Empirical Findings from Attachment Theory***

Bowlby (1969, 1973) proposed that attachment security develops from a consistent history of receiving comfort and support from caregivers. Research typically suggests that securely attached men will have greater confidence in the availability of their attachment figures in romantic relationships (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987), along with high levels of closeness and trust in their adult romantic relationships (e.g. Collins & Read, 1990; Simpson, 1990). A considerable amount of research has confirmed that securely attached men tend to be involved in more stable and satisfying romantic relationships, are more responsive to their partner's needs, and experience fewer negative relationship disruptions (e.g. Feeney & Noller, 1990; Simpson, 1990; Feeney, 1996; Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan & Cowan, 2002).

Bowlby (1969, 1973) also suggested that anxious/ambivalent attachment emerges in response to inconsistent or unpredictable care giving during development. Studies conclude that in romantic relationships, anxious/ambivalent attached men are insecure about whether they are worthy of love, fear rejection, and ruminate about the availability of their attachment figure (e.g. Cassidy & Berlin, 1994).

Avoidant attachment originates from consistent neglect or rejection by caregivers during development (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Empirical findings suggest that in their relationships, avoidant attached men have a cynical view about the intentions of their attachment figures, and thus strive to maintain autonomy and emotional distance from others (e.g. Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989).

Research suggests that anxious/ambivalent and avoidant attached men generally have less stable and less satisfying relationships, are less responsive to their partners' needs and report more relationship disruptions (e.g. Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). More specifically, research typically suggests that although men with avoidant attachment styles had the lowest levels of relationship satisfaction, they had high levels of relationship stability, whilst men with anxious attachment styles displayed the lowest level of relationship stability (e.g. Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994).

Generally, empirical research based on attachment theory suggests that men seek romantic relationships and partners who serve many of the same functions in adulthood that infant-care-givers and relationships served earlier in life (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Zeifman & Hazan, 2000).

Relationship research more broadly has frequently found that for men, jealousy and insecurity, as well as betrayal, are the most prevalent and potentially destructive threats to romantic relationships (e.g. Widmer, Treas & Newcomb, 1998; Amato & Previti, 2003; Willets, Sprecher & Beck, 2004; Previti & Amato, 2004). An individual's thought that infidelity might occur in their romantic relationships is considered to evoke jealousy and insecurity (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000). Many studies have focused on the psychological correlates of jealousy and insecurity, and typically found that individuals with disrupted attachment histories are more likely to interpret the behaviour of their

partner in terms of abandonment, and will consequently have a lower threshold for adult jealousy (e.g. Radecki-Bush, Farrell & Bush, 1993; Buunk, 1997). Betrayal (a term often used synonymously with terms such as adultery, cheating, infidelity and unfaithfulness) is defined as when an individual becomes involved in sexual relationship outside of their romantic relationship, and so studies on betrayal are typically concerned with extradyadic sexual involvement (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000). Research has also investigated the psychological correlates of extradyadic sexual involvement (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2000), and has generally concluded that infidelity is related to lower self-esteem and people with an anxious/ambivalent attachment style (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Sheppard, Nelson & Andreoli-Mathie, 1995).

### **2.3.2 Interpersonal Explanation**

Most psychological theories explain behaviour in relationships by reference to *intra*-personal processes (properties residing *within* a person) such as personal dispositions i.e. attachment orientation, or genetic make-up i.e. evolutionary orientation (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000). In contrast, ‘interpersonal’ explanations explain behaviour in relationships by reference to *inter*-personal processes (properties residing *between* people) (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000). In existing relationship literature, the most prominent ‘interpersonal’ explanation is the Interdependence Orientation (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004).

#### **2.3.2.1 Interdependence Orientation**

Interdependence theory, conceived by Harold Kelley and John Thibaut suggests that experience in relationships is inseparable from the interdependence characterising the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Interdependence

describes the strength and quality of the effects interacting individuals exert on one another's preferences, motives and behaviour (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Interdependence theory describes interaction as the central feature of all interpersonal relationships, and that those yield outcomes for interacting individuals (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). According to this theory, all individuals are assumed to be goal oriented, seeking to obtain good outcomes, and avoid those that are bad (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000).

Interdependence theory does not seek to identify a single 'engine' that drives behaviour; instead it systematically accounts for the interpersonal properties that shape interaction and relationship experiences (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000). The interpersonal properties that shape interaction and experience in relationships include: 'Degree of Dependence' (the extent to which each partner's outcomes depend on the other's behaviour), 'Mutuality of Dependence' (the extent to which two people depend on a relationship to the same degree), 'Basis of Dependence' (whether the partners' dependence on one another is absolute or contingent), and 'Correspondence of Outcomes' (whether the partners' outcomes correspond or conflict) (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978).

Kelley & Thibaut (1978) proposed that individuals react in different ways to patterns of interdependence. They suggested that the simplest way to approach interaction is to act upon direct self-interest by maximising one's own outcomes. However, alternative approaches are based on the degree of concern with one's own outcomes in relation to a partner's outcomes (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). For example, individuals may promote good outcomes for themselves *and* partners, good outcomes that are completely other-oriented, or seek good outcomes *in relation to* partners (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000).

### ***2.3.2.2 Empirical Findings from Interdependence Theory***

Research based on interdependence theory has typically found that men with a high degree of dependency to a close partner become tied to the relationship, were also increasingly unlikely to end it, have strong feelings of attachment and commitment, and experience greater distress if the relationship is threatened (e.g. Simpson, 1987; Felmee, Sprecher & Bassin, 1990; Buunk, 1991; Strachan & Dutton, 1992). Additionally, empirical findings suggest that mutuality of dependence is associated with enhanced couple functioning (e.g. Stafford & Canary, 1991; Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). Furthermore, studies conclude that correspondence of outcomes determines whether interacting individuals feel they are working with or against one another, and is relevant to ease of decision making among couples (partners choose to behave in such a manner as to maximise both one's own and a partner's outcomes) (e.g. Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Gottman, 1979; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Surra & Longstreth, 1990; Holmes & Murray, 1996). One of the most significant contributions of interdependence theory is the proposition that ongoing romantic relationships typically require that partners coordinate their actions (e.g. Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000). As a consequence, people often act in ways that go against their immediate self interest in order to benefit the partner (e.g. Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004).

In relationship research, the Investment Model which was built on the interdependence orientation is one of the most frequently cited theories explaining relationship maintenance (Dindia & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). Rusbult (1983) conceived the Investment Model which suggests that commitment (an individual's intention to remain in a relationship) lies at the centre of this model and is a representation of dependency. According to Rusbult's model, three factors contribute to the emergence of

commitment: (1.) Increases in satisfaction, (2.) Declines in the desirability of available alternatives, and (3.) Increases in the investment of resources in a relationship (e.g. time and effort). Based on this, Rusbult (1983) found that when men are committed they are more likely to remain in the relationship, engage in relationship maintenance behaviours, and that this process is likely to be reciprocated when it is observed.

### **2.3.3 Structural Explanation**

Structural explanations are based on the assumption that external causes such as current social roles, situations and/or expectations shape behaviour (Winstead et al., 1997). In existing literature, the most prominent ‘structural’ theoretical orientation explaining gender differences and/or masculinity in romantic relationships is Role Theory (Winstead et al., 1997).

#### ***2.3.3.1 Role Theory***

Role theory suggests that all social behaviour is socially prescribed, and can be viewed as a performance where people play out parts which have been assigned to them (Hargreaves & Colley, 1986). According to role theorists, social roles can be broken down into two constituent elements: social positions and social expectations (e.g. Hargreaves & Colley, 1986; Risman & Schwartz, 1989). There are a wide variety of different social positions (e.g. occupational positions such as teacher or doctor, and positions in a kinship network such as son, father or husband), each of which carries with it a particular set of expectations about behaviour (e.g. in the eyes of their children, fathers should be strong and good at fixing things) (Hargreaves & Colley, 1986). All of these roles are relatively impersonal and so irrespective of who is playing the part; the expectation will almost always be the same (Hargreaves & Colley, 1986). Terman &



Miles (1936) contributed to the development of a role perspective on men and proposed that masculinity and femininity were two opposing types of personality, and that men and women were psychologically healthy to the extent that they displayed the characteristics that were appropriate to their biological sexes.

Several theories have been put forward explaining how males come to learn or 'internalise' the male sex-role. Goffman (1959) proposed that people inevitably realise their characters in society, adding that people bring their roles to life for an audience and for being recognised by that audience. In contrast, Cognitive Developmental Theory asserts that between two and five years of age, children learn to categorise themselves as 'boys' or 'girls' and they actively work to become competent in meeting social expectations of their gender (Piaget, 1965; Campbell, 1993). Bem (1981, 1993) developed this theory further and conceived Gender Schema Theory which describes the sex-role assimilation process as a learning of schemas, or the acquisition of lenses through which people see the world and themselves. According to Bem, the gender polarization lens refers to the emphasis placed on gender differences; the belief that females and males are fundamentally different; and that people must not deviate from their appropriate gender role. There are social penalties for a female to be too masculine and for a man to be more feminine (Bem, 1981, 1993). The gender polarization lens is imposed on people from birth, is learned from many sources, and affects an individual's identity and how they behave at any given moment (Bem, 1981, 1993). Finally, Bandura & Walters (1963) and Mischel's (1966) Social Learning Theory claims that individuals learn to behave in masculine or feminine ways (based on sex-role norms) through observing and imitating what they see in others and by being reinforced by others.

### ***2.3.3.2 Empirical Findings from Role Theory***

Empirical research suggests that the roles boys typically internalise from the processes of male sex-role assimilation discussed in section 2.3.3.1 are to be competitive, assertive and instrumental in relationships, and to avoid gender-inappropriate tasks in relationships (e.g. Frable & Bem, 1985; Frable, 1989).

Many studies have focused on describing the male sex role, summarising it as: winning, emotional control, risk-taking, violence, dominance, playboy, self-reliance, primacy of work, power over women and pursuit of status, and concluded that these characteristics manifest in all situations, including their romantic relationships (e.g. Pleck & Sawyer, 1974; Brannon, 1976; Mahalik et al., 2003; Burn & Ward, 2005). Generally, men's conformity to those masculine norms have typically been identified as negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, especially the satisfaction of women, and that men's relationship difficulties i.e. being emotionally connected to female partners, is highly associated to those norms (e.g. Burn & Ward, 2005).

Empirical research from role theory has also focused on how gender roles influence courtship between men and women in the initial stages of a relationship (Winstead et al., 1997). Studies suggest that traditional gender stereotypes designate the male as the proactive initiator of a relationship and the female as the reactive acceptor/decliner of the male's initiative; and that women saw themselves as highly dependent on the male's behaviour in describing what occurred during dates in developing relationships, whereas men only described their own actions (e.g. Rose & Frieze, 1993).

#### **2.3.4 Socialization Explanation**

Socialization explanations are based on the assumption that family and early relationships affect the development of individual characteristics and thus behaviour (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000). In existing literature, the most prominent ‘socialization’ theoretical orientation explaining gender differences and/or masculinity in romantic relationships stem from Psychoanalytic Theory (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000).

##### ***2.3.4.1 Psychoanalytic Theory***

Chodorow’s (1978, 1989) psychoanalytic theory, based on the principles of object relations, assumes that the development of core personality and gender difference is shaped by relationships during early life. Chodorow proposed that being the typical primary caregiver, mothers form distinct relationships with sons and daughters. Since mothers and daughters share the same sex they identify with each other causing girls to develop gender identities *within relationships* and internalize their mothers as part of themselves (Chodorow, 1978, 1989). Boys do not share the sex of mothers so they establish their identities *apart from relationships* (Chodorow, 1978, 1989). From this perspective, males carve their identities independent of others and females establish their identities in relation to others, therefore the two sexes develop fundamentally different orientations to relationships (Chodorow, 1978, 1989).

##### ***2.3.4.2 Empirical Findings from Psychoanalytic Theory***

The most widely established empirical finding based on Chodorow’s (1978, 1989) theory suggests that the lack of identification between sons and mothers, coupled with the sons’ need to define their identities independent of their mothers, explains the

tendencies of many adult men to strive for high degrees of independence, be emotionally reserved, and rely on action other than talking in close relationships (Chodorow, 1978, 1989; Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000).

### **2.3.5 Constructionist Explanation**

An alternative genre of explanation for gender differences and/or masculinity is the ‘constructionist’ explanation (Wood, 2000). This is based on the assumption that gender is socially constructed, and that differences between men and women are formed and sustained through social practices within different historical and cultural contexts (Wood, 2000). Although the constructionist explanation features in existing relationship literature to a significantly lesser extent than the explanations already discussed (Wood, 2000), an influential idea which has emerged from this tradition and underpinned research on men’s practices in relationships is Connell’s (1987, 1995) concept of Hegemonic Masculinity (Allen, 2007).

#### ***2.3.5.1 Hegemonic Masculinity***

Connell’s (1987, 1995) concept of Hegemonic Masculinity is the most influential and popular element of his constructionist based Social Theory of Gender (Demetriou, 2001). According to this theory, it is believed that there is diversity in femininities and masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1995). Connell suggested that gender is something that is constantly produced and reproduced in social practice within different historical and cultural contexts.

Connell (1987, 1995) suggested that to understand gender in its plurality, it is essential to acknowledge relations of domination and subordination between (and within) genders. Underlying Connell’s (1987) work is the feminist principle in which he asserts

that the power relationships between genders in the current Western gender order are centred on a single structural fact: “the global dominance of men over women” (p. 183). This is achieved through a configuration of culturally exalted gender practices which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, termed Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995). In this way, masculinity is seen as *exclusively* a relationship with power and dominance over/in relation to women (Connell, 1987, 1995). Hegemonic masculinity which is always constructed in relation to women, as well as various subordinate masculinities, generates dominance not only over women but also over subordinate masculinities (Connell, 1987, 1995). However, a discussion about hegemony over subordinate masculinities is beyond the scope of this research. Given the importance Connell attaches to the feminist principle, hegemonic masculinity is first and foremost a strategy for the subordination of women (Connell, 1995; Demetriou, 2001).

Connell (1987, 1995) proposed that hegemonic masculinity is connected to the institutionalization of men’s dominance over women. He developed this insight in terms of three structures of gender relations - distinguishing relations of labour, power, and cathexis (emotional attachment). According to Connell, in terms of labour relations, men’s position in patriarchal societies yields a series of material advantages (e.g. higher income); regarding power relations, men control the means of institutionalised power (e.g. the army); and in terms of cathexis, men’s emotional attachments are characterised by male superiority, violence and emotional detachment rather than reciprocity, intimacy, and emotional attachment. He proposed that the three main institutions corresponding to these structures of gender relations – the labour market, the state and the family/close relationships, are examples of ‘gender regimes’. In Connell’s view,

hegemonic masculinity is a configuration of practice, but also institutionalised in large-scale gender regimes.

#### ***2.3.5.2 Empirical Findings from Hegemonic Masculinity***

Albeit to a significantly small extent, there is some qualitative relationship research which has aimed to reveal the place of romance in men's experience of heterosexual relationships and its relationship with hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Pearce & Stacey, 1995; Allen, 2007). This research suggests that for those men who participated, they experienced romantic masculinity in relationships which appeared in diverse forms, and that most were consistent with the operation of hegemonic masculinity. For example, in those studies it was argued that men mirrored the Mills and Boon romantic hero who masterfully swept a woman off her feet in a way that was entirely compatible with the exercise of male power over women. Or, men were seen to desire enduring romance and make this publicly known i.e. one participant explained how his partner had the other half of the heart chain he wore, while simultaneously expressing traditional male virility by asserting that he would like to be "... just about dead and still got your woman" (Allen, 2007, p. 146). These studies support Connell's (1987, 1995) work by highlighting the flexibility of masculinity and stability of male practices of power (e.g. Allen, 2007).

#### ***2.3.6 Other Significant Empirical Findings in the area of Men and Romantic Relationships***

In the section that follows, there will be a brief review of other widely examined themes, phenomena and tendencies which consistently appear in extant literature on men and romantic relationships. Like the majority of the empirical findings already

reviewed, many of the findings that follow have emerged from quantitative research approaches, rooted in positivist philosophy (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Allen & Walker, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004). Some have also emanated from typological research<sup>3</sup> (Feeney, 2006).

There is evidence based on balance theory<sup>4</sup> showing that for men, similarity is positively correlated with attraction, and has many adaptive functions including facilitating initial encounters and dyadic interactions (e.g. Byrne, 1961, 1971; Herbst, Gaertner & Insko, 2003; Klohnen & Luo, 2003).

A substantial body of research has focused on identifying relational maintenance strategies (Dindia & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). This research has most consistently found that for men, being open and self-disclosing contributes to relationship maintenance (e.g. Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia, 1994). Empirical findings suggest that although men express their emotions and self-disclose less than women (e.g. Dindia & Allen, 1992), for men, self disclosing enhances positive feelings between partners, intensifies experiences of intimacy, and is positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and maintenance (e.g. Hendrick, 1981; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Prager & Buhrmester, 1998). Research suggests that for men, effective responses towards the discloser include listening, emotional support, responses that convey acceptance, respect, and genuine caring about

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<sup>3</sup> Typological research is basically atheoretical and descriptive by nature (Feeney, 2006). For instance, since the 1980s many scholars have focused on identifying typologies of relational maintenance strategies, typically by asking samples of couples what they did to maintain their relationships (Dindia & Emmers-Sommer, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Balance Theory suggests that similar individuals like each other because they form a balanced system that leads to harmony and positive feelings whereas an imbalance would cause psychological discomfort (Heider, 1958).

the discloser and what they are saying, and that this contributes to relationship maintenance (e.g. Reis & Shaver, 1988; Dindia, 1994). However, empirical findings also suggest that men listened and served as sources of emotional support to a lesser extent than women (e.g. Miller, Berg & Archer, 1983; Cutrona, 1996). Moreover, research has found that for men, it is social support (emotional, informational and/or instrumental support provided by people from each partners' social network) that aids romantic relationship longevity, and can be a more important predictor of positive outcomes (for individuals and the relationship) than are the specific supportive behaviours provided by partners (e.g. Lakey & Cassady, 1990; Cutrona, 1996).

Empirical research has also consistently found that for men, other behaviours serving to maintain romantic relationships include both being together and seeking/allowing autonomy (e.g. Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Ragsdale, 1996). In addition, doing romantic gestures has been found to be a significant strategy involved in relationship maintenance, and that this consists of sending romantic cards, notes, making special telephone calls and buying gifts (e.g. Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia, 1994).

Studies have also commonly found that men who report sexual satisfaction will report higher levels of overall relationship quality, satisfaction and maintenance (e.g. Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Edwards & Booth, 1994; Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Sprecher, 2002). Furthermore, males were found to place more importance on having sex for pure pleasure/physical gratification, to please one's partner, and to relieve sexual tension, whereas women wanted sexual activities to



increase intimacy and love (e.g. Knox & Wilson, 1981; Sprecher, 1989; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher & Regan, 2002).

An equally substantial body of research has also focused on identifying behaviours that contribute to the deterioration and dissolution of romantic relationships (Reis & Rusbult, 2004; Roberts, 2006; Vangelisti, 2006). This research has most consistently found that for men, the malevolent use of physical violence and psychological power (most commonly framed as dominance, verbal aggression or brainwashing) between partners were significant predictors of relationship deterioration and dissolution; and that physically violent acts and abusive psychological power were typically inflicted more by men on women, usually as a means of gaining a sense of control or to counteract a sense of being less powerful than woman in an intimate relationship (e.g. Mason & Blackenship, 1987; Murphy & Cascardi, 1993; Marshall, 1994; Marshall & Vitanza, 1994; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001).

Although research suggests that men are more eager than women to engage in promiscuous sex (e.g. Regan & Berscheid, 1997), it also suggests that men disapprove of extradyadic sex to the extent that it may contribute to the deterioration and dissolution of romantic relationships (e.g. Metts, 1994; Amato & Previti, 2003).

However, men's extradyadic sexual involvement was found to be most likely to occur if there is sexual deprivation in their romantic relationships (e.g. Buss & Shackelford, 1997). Research suggests that four types of justification used to excuse extradyadic sexual relationship include: sexual variety, emotional intimacy, extrinsic motivation, and love - and that men were higher in sexually orientated justifications, whereas women were higher in justifications based on love (e.g. Glass & Wright, 1992).

Furthermore, based on equity theory<sup>5</sup>, empirical findings suggest that for men, inequity within a relationship where the outcome and input of each partner are unequal, demotivates them to maintain the relationship thus causing the relationship to break down (e.g. Adams, 1965; Walster, Bercheid & Walster, 1973; Hatfield, Utne & Traupmann, 1979; Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). Additionally, research concludes that for men, inequitable relationships cause emotional turmoil directed toward the partner that in turn works against their motivation to maintain the relationship resulting in its deterioration or dissolution (e.g. Hatfield et al., 1985; Sprecher, 1986; Canary & Stafford, 1992).

Research suggests that for men, an interaction pattern between partners that has been commonly associated with the deterioration and dissolution of romantic relationships is the Demand-Withdraw<sup>6</sup> pattern of communication (Christensen & Heavey, 1993).

Studies typically show that for men, relationship satisfaction is negatively associated with the use of the demand-withdrawal pattern (e.g. Christensen & Heavey, 1993). It has been found that men were more likely to be the withdrawers, and couples were particularly prone to have long-term difficulties when men withdrew due to women's demands (e.g. Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Heavey, Christensen & Malamuth, 1995).

The theory and research reviewed have been highly significant in increasing 'scientific' knowledge on relationships, but are also considered to have enormous practical value

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<sup>5</sup> According to equity theorists, individuals continuously assess whether they are equitably treated, and an equitable involvement means that the outcome and input are equal for both parties (e.g. Hatfield et al., 1985; Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994). The most satisfying associations to the individual making the assessment are equitable ones, followed by over-benefited ones, followed by under-benefited ones (Hatfield et al., 1985).

<sup>6</sup> The demand-withdraw pattern is characterised as one partner's tendency to withdraw in response to the other's request for a change in behaviour (Christensen & Heavey, 1993).

(Wood, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004). For instance, understanding the predictors of maintaining a successful and satisfying romantic relationship have facilitated the development of effective therapeutic interventions that encourage relationship enhancement, as well as assisted those clients/couples who are in distress (Dindia & Emmers-Sommer, 2006). For example, in practice, encouraging and facilitating clients/couples to be more emotionally supportive can help them to create relationship enhancement (Guerney, 1977; Cramer, 2006).

Although empirical findings on men and romantic relationships predominantly emerge from quantitative research approaches rooted in positivist philosophy (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Allen & Walker, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004) some qualitative, non-positivist research exists in the literature. Qualitative research on men and romantic relationships has also been studied from a critical psychological (feminist) perspective, and examples of this follow.

Burns' (2002) qualitative research from a social constructionist, narrative and feminist perspective focuses on how gender difference is constructed in relation to love and emotionality in intimate relationships. She contrasts evolutionary theory which commonly supports notions of 'natural' differences (refer to section 2.3.1.1), with social constructionism which calls into question the 'naturalness' of any such notions by highlighting how they are continually reproduced through currently available linguistic resources and narratives (refer to section 2.3.5).

Burns conducted discourse analysis on twenty-two in-depth, one-to-one interviews with men and women about their intimate relationships and love. She identified two broad discourses, 'the romantic' and 'the workaday'. Burns emphasised that her analysis was not claiming that women and men are different, but that they tend to draw differently on

two broad narratives to talk about their emotions and intimate relationships, and that those broad narratives organize gender and emotions differently. She found that women tended to tell a romantic love story built around male emotional inexpressivity and difficulty with feelings, in contrast with their own emotional intensity and expressivity. Burns found in contrast that men were able to resist being 'in love' and constructed a version of themselves as able to work at relationships, reproducing themselves as rational in 'doing' heterosexual love and intimacy. Burns found that the work discourse of relationships resists the discourse of romantic love and instead constructs heterosexual relationships in line with a Protestant work ethic (the 'right' emotions are 'produced' rather than being irrational and out of control (unproductive feelings)). Burns suggested that from a discursive perspective, the ways in which men and women are constructed as different derives from the discourses being differentially available to men and women. Rather than people being predisposed to behave along gender lines, Burns highlighted the social context in which gender difference is pervasively reproduced by being inscribed in dominant discourses such as the evolutionary discourse of evolved gender difference.

Similarly, Wendy Hollway (1998) a feminist psychoanalyst carried out intensive studies of British couples talking about their relationships. One of Hollway's concerns was the way men talked about, understood and positioned themselves in their relationships with women. She viewed the patterns in men's understanding of relationships as cultural and social in origin, but believed these patterns also indicated the operation of unconscious and irrational defence mechanisms such as 'projection' and 'splitting' described in psychoanalytic theory. Hollway argued that although men are frequently reluctant to admit to, and often suppress recognition of their desires, men's wants were not

dissimilar to women. She suggested that like women, men wanted relationships, to be loved and looked after, reciprocity, and safe havens. She argued that men differed because they had an equally strong investment in not 'voicing' these desires, or voicing them in a particular way, since, from childhood, need is associated with feelings of intense vulnerability.

Hollway's examination of discourses about relationships in British societies revealed several common themes which constructed different male sexual identities. Firstly, she found the 'male sex drive discourse' which is the argument that men are driven to have sex in a way that women are not; that men should, therefore, initiate sex, pursue women, and be active. Hollway suggested that in this way of talking, male sexuality is presented as an impersonal need, not a matter of romance, intimacy and dependency, but of responding to physiology and the sexual signals of women's bodies. She added that in adopting this way of voicing, men present themselves as motivated, not by the need for others, but driven by biology. Secondly, Hollway found the 'have and hold discourse' as a prevalent way of making sense of sex. She suggested that the emphasis is on commitment, relationships, and sexuality as a sign of romantic involvement linked to marriage. Hollway found that women were typically presented as the subject of this discourse (they accept this discourse and speak from it) and men as the object (they are outside of this discourse and are the object of women's strategies to obtain commitment). Thirdly, Hollway identified the 'permissive discourse', where sex is presented as a matter of pleasure, with both men and women seen as having a right to sexual expression. Hollway argued that this discourse is one that men generally find more congenial than women.

Hollway's main point was that sexuality and relationships gain their meaning in a cultural context and that there is no essence to sexuality, rather, sexuality is largely a matter of how people understand it. However, she added that people do not have free choice in this understanding, since to a large extent people's understandings will mirror the understandings shared in a culture. Hollway argued that men and women were socialised into different paths through the available discourses, and these paths protect male power and result in men suppressing the needs they share in common with women. According to Hollway, the consequence is that when men talk about themselves, their sexual experiences, and relationships, a type of 'splitting' and 'projection' is evident. She suggested that although expressing feelings, irrationality and dependency are general human capacities, men typically projected<sup>7</sup> those onto women. Furthermore, Hollway suggested that emotions which are not necessarily contradictory and opposite (one can be both independent and dependent, strong and weak) are seen as split and specialised, with one for women and one for men. Hollway's argument was that men have a considerable investment in misrecognising their needs, taking up certain voices and projecting other voices onto women.

The theory and research reviewed are considered highly significant to increasing knowledge on men and relationships, as well as having important practical value. Although some qualitative, non-positivist research exists of which some examples have been provided, as discussed, the field of men and romantic relationships is still dominated by theory and research rooted in philosophical positivism (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Allen & Walker, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004). Consequently, the critique of theory and research that follows focuses on this dominant work.

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<sup>7</sup> Projection involves seeing in another person emotions that rightfully belong to oneself, but which are unacceptable in some way (Hollway, 1998).

## **2.4 Critique of Theory and Research and Aim of the Current Study**

The theoretical orientations presented in this review are considered highly relevant to understanding men and romantic relationships (Winstead et al., 1997; Wood, 2000), though they also appear to hold some drawbacks. With the exception of the constructionist explanation which will be critiqued later, the theoretical orientations reviewed are connected to a ‘natural science’ approach and modernist thinking (Wood, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004). Consequently, they assume that there are discoverable laws/truths allowing the explanation, prediction and control of human behaviour, thus being strongly deterministic (Woolfe et al., 2003).

More specifically, the ‘individual’ explanations and research reviewed seem to assume that all men’s behaviours and experiences in romantic relationships are entirely determined by causes beyond their control such as evolved and inherited biological make-up, and personal dispositions developed from their infant relationships i.e. ‘internal working models’. In the case of the biologically based evolutionary psychology theory and research, it seems to be assumed that male and female behaviours and experiences in romantic relationships will always be fundamentally different. Furthermore, these theories and findings appear to be based on the assumption that according to their biological make-up or internal working model, men will behave and experience romantic relationships in a fixed, predictable and universal way.

The ‘interpersonal’ explanation and empirical findings reviewed seem to assume that all couple’s experiences of romantic relationships are solely shaped by the specific interpersonal properties/interdependence style that characterises the relationships. This work appears to assume that according to their particular interdependence style, a

couple will experience their romantic relationship in a fixed, predictable and universal way.

The 'structural' explanation and research reviewed appears to assume that all men's behaviour and experiences in romantic relationships are entirely determined by external causes such as male sex-role norms and social expectations; that there are fundamental differences between norms for males and for females; and that people do not/must not deviate from them. It seems to be assumed that masculinity, or 'being a man' in romantic relationships is dictated by a fixed set of social norms that independently exist and precede human action which are learnt/internalised (either passively, through the acquisition of the gender polarization lens, or through observation, imitation and reinforcement) and enacted. This explanation and research thus seems to assume that 'being a man' in a romantic relationship is outside of the control of the individual, and that men are 'trapped' into acting out those social norms. Consequently, it seems to be assumed that all men will understand and experience 'being men' in romantic relationships in a fixed, predictable and universal way.

The psychoanalytic 'socialization' explanation and empirical research appears to assume that masculinity is shaped entirely by relationships during early life, and will be reproduced in later relationships. This theory also seems to assume that 'being a man' in romantic relationships is outside of men's personal control. Like some of the work mentioned already, it appears to be assumed that there is a fundamental difference between masculinity and femininity in romantic relationships. Furthermore, since all male identities are seen as being shaped through their early relationships in the same way i.e. independent of others, this theory and research seems to make the assumption that masculinity in romantic relationships will be fixed, predictable and universal.



Given these assumptions, from a counselling psychology - critical realist perspective, it could be argued that a limitation of this work is that it appears to neglect acknowledging and understanding men's individual subjective experiences in romantic relationships.

In contrast to the explanations just critiqued, the constructionist explanation reviewed acknowledges diversity in masculinities, and is less deterministic (Connell, 1995; Whitehead, 2002). However, Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, although underpinned by this framework, also appears to hold a particular limitation. From a counselling psychology- critical realist perspective, it could be argued that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is reductionist, as it treats masculinity exclusively and universally as a relationship with power over women. Therefore, a limitation of this seems to be that it fails to engage with the contradictory subjective experiences of diverse masculinities. This is supported by Seidler (2006) who is an established author in the field of men and masculinities, and critically explores the ways in which men and masculinities are commonly theorised, arguing for the exploration of the complexities of diverse male subjectivities across different histories, cultures and traditions. Seidler (2006) argued that understanding men and their relational/emotional life in terms of Connell's idea is disconnected from the exploration of their own lived experiences as men, which may involve the tensions within men's lives and relationships as they attempt to live up to particular models of masculinity.

Given these limitations, an exploration of men's subjective lived experiences of romantic relationships appears to be a gap in this work. Addressing this gap seems to be highly important to counselling psychology as it views human beings as open to experience, flexible and adaptable (Woolfe et al., 2003). Counselling psychology emphasises the significance of engaging with subjectivity, values, feelings and

meanings, to respect first person accounts as valid in their own terms, and to negotiate between personal perceptions and world-views without assuming an objectively discoverable truth, or the automatic superiority of any one way of knowing or experiencing (Woolfe et al., 2003).

The empirical findings reviewed that dominate the area of men and romantic relationships seem to provide some interesting insights into this field, however, they also seem to hold some drawbacks. As discussed, the findings from the quantitative studies reviewed belong under the umbrella of 'scientific knowledge' and are rooted in philosophical realism and positivism (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Allen & Walker, 2000). Consequently, these studies are based on the assumption that there is one true identifiable reality which can be accurately measured, that phenomena should be defined by empirical categories, and that those phenomena directly determine people's perception of them, so there is a direct correspondence between phenomena and their representation. In this regard, it could be suggested that the research reviewed assumes that a romantic relationship is a singular phenomena that exists independently, that individuals can objectively identify it, and will have a fixed, predictable and universal experience and perception of it. These assumptions seem to relate also to the several other relationship themes, topics and phenomena examined (e.g. physical attraction, commitment, jealousy, sex, inequity).

Given these assumptions, from a counselling psychology - critical realist position, it could be argued that the empirical research reviewed has failed to explore men's subjective lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships. It is important to address this gap in the literature as it is highly relevant to the area of counselling psychology as mentioned above.

Given the gap that appears in existing literature dominating the topic of this study, it could be argued that an investigation into men's subjective experiences and understandings of romantic relationships has perhaps not benefited from enough academic scrutiny. It appears highly worthy and relevant to counselling psychology theory and practice that this is addressed, as it could highlight and complement existing theory and research, as well as contribute to the development of new understandings in this field. Consequently, the aim of this study is to explore men's lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships, in order to illuminate and enhance existing literature, adding to the growth of knowledge in this area.

## **2.5 Summary**

In this section, I have attempted to critically review the theory and research in the area of heterosexual men and romantic relationships which has enabled me to illustrate a gap in the literature leading to the current research aim. The main theoretical orientations in this area appeared to be the evolutionary psychology orientation, attachment orientation, interdependence orientation, role theory, psychoanalytic theory and the concept of hegemonic masculinity. These perspectives explain men's behaviour/practices and experiences in romantic relationships. With the exception of the latter perspective, they all seemed to be rooted in a 'natural science' approach, thus appearing inherently deterministic, and assume that all men will understand and experience 'being men' in romantic relationships in a fixed, predictable and universal way. Consequently, by critiquing these theories and associated empirical findings from a counselling psychology - critical realist perspective, I illustrated that a limitation of this work was that it appeared to neglect acknowledging and understanding fully men's individual subjective experiences of romantic relationships.

Although the concept of hegemonic masculinity seemed to stand in contrast to those theoretical orientations as being less deterministic, in the critique I highlighted that this view of men's practices seemed to be reductionist as it treats masculinity exclusively and universally as a relationship with power over women. Consequently, in the critique I highlighted that a limitation of this perspective was that it appeared to fail in engaging with the contradictory subjective experiences of diverse masculinities.

Furthermore, in critiquing the empirical findings reviewed, I also illustrated that since they are predominantly rooted in philosophical positivism, they seem to assume that concepts such as a romantic relationship (and other relationship themes) are singular phenomena that exist independently, can be objectively identified and accurately measured, and that all men will have a fixed, predictable and universal perception and experience of them. I then illustrated that a limitation of this work seems to be that it failed to explore men's subjective lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships.

Following this, I have justified addressing the identified limitations by highlighting its relevance to counselling psychology, and presented the aim of this study. In the methodology section that follows there will be a detailed discussion of how the research was carried out, and justifications for this.

### **3. Methodology**

This section discusses the methodology and methods used in this study. Although the terms ‘methodology’ and ‘method’ are often used interchangeably, they actually refer to different aspects of doing research (Finlay, 2006). ‘Methodology’ refers to the general approach to studying research topics, whereas ‘method’ denotes a specific research technique (Silverman, 1993). It is helpful to differentiate between these because the former is much more directly informed by the researcher’s epistemological position than the latter (Willig, 2008).

#### **3.1 Research Aim**

A review of the literature on men and romantic relationships suggests that this subject has been predominantly studied from a ‘natural science’, positivist and quantitative framework (Kashy & Levesque, 2000; Allen & Walker, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004; Feeney, 2006). Existing grand theories and research appear to rely on deterministic and reductionist explanations, and empirical studies seem based on the assumption that men’s romantic relationships (and other relationship phenomena) are a singular concept existing independently, uniformly, can be objectively identified and accurately measured, and will be perceived and experienced by men in a straightforward, predictable, static and universal way (Wood, 2000; Seidler, 2006; Feeney, 2006). Consequently, from a counselling psychology - critical realist position, a gap in this literature appears to be that men’s subjective lived experiences and personal perceptions of romantic relationships have not been fully identified, respected, and understood in their own terms. This study therefore aims to bridge this gap by exploring men’s lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships in order to illuminate and

complement existing literature, as well as add to the growth of new and enhanced knowledge in this area.

### **3.2 Qualitative Research Approach**

Given the aim of this study, a qualitative rather than quantitative approach seemed most appropriate as it is concerned with the quality and texture of experience rather than the identification of cause-effect relationships (Willig, 2008). This can generate new, richer insights which can open up the meanings of areas of social life that were formerly not completely understood, contributing to the growth of understanding (McLeod, 2001; Finlay, 2006; Willig, 2008).

A qualitative approach involves in-depth exploration, description, and interpretation of the subjective meanings of phenomena and experience given by the research participant themselves (Finlay, 2006). This seems consistent with the critical realist position of this study which considers reality to exist, with meanings and experiences of this reality to be fluid and subjective, as they depend upon people's individual beliefs and expectations (Bhaskar, 1978; Bunge, 1993; Finlay, 2006).

A qualitative approach seems congruent with Counselling Psychology philosophy which shares the ambition to search for the quality and texture of subjective experience and meaning, through the collection of personal accounts from individuals themselves (McLeod, 2001; Woolfe et al., 2003).

### **3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative research approach founded by Jonathan Smith (1996), was chosen as the method for exploring men's lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships. This choice was made because

IPA is primarily interested in how people make sense of their lived experiences and aims to systematically and attentively reflect on this (Smith et al., 2009). This is in contrast to other qualitative methods typically used in psychology including GT which is concerned with developing an explanatory level account of social and psychological processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); DP which is not concerned with experience itself, but with the way individuals talk about a particular experience within a particular context (Potter & Wetherell, 1987); and FDA which examines the availability of a particular way of talking about an issue within a culture and the way this prescribes what people can experience (Willig, 2008) (as discussed in section 1.5). Furthermore, an IPA study seems highly relevant to counselling psychology in which the search for understanding and meaning is central, and in which the focus is upon an engagement with subjective experience.

IPA has been informed by two key areas of philosophical thinking: phenomenology and hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009).

### ***3.3.1 Phenomenology***

Husserl (1970, 1982) proposed that phenomenology is interested in the world as it is experienced by people within particular contexts, rather than in abstract statements about the nature of the world in general. IPA has a strong relationship with phenomenology as it is concerned with the detailed exploration of human lived experience in its own terms, instead of attempting to fix experience in predefined categories (Smith et al., 2009). According to phenomenology, objects and subjects are not viewed as separate from people's experience of these, but rather, the meaning that people attribute to objects and subjects constitute their reality (Husserl, 1970, 1982). Phenomenology asserts that the experience and meaning of a phenomenon varies

depending on the perceiver's mental orientation (desires, wishes, judgements, emotions, aims, and purposes), referred to as 'intentionality' (Husserl, 1970, 1982). From this perspective, different people perceive and experience what appears to be the 'same' phenomenon in very different ways, and so it is believed that the experiential content of consciousness (people's lived experiences) should be explored in its own terms (Husserl, 1970, 1982). Similarly, IPA is also concerned with the participant's subjective meaning of an experience, which is understood to represent the experience itself (Smith et al., 2009).

### **3.3.2 Hermeneutics**

A major theoretical underpinning of phenomenology is hermeneutics – the theory of interpretation (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Smith et al., 2009). Hermeneutics is critical of the view that it is possible to obtain knowledge that is outside of an interpretative stance (Heidegger, 1962/1927). According to hermeneutic thinking, phenomenology is considered as an explicitly interpretative activity (Heidegger, 1962/1927). Hermeneutics and phenomenology share common ground as their primary aim is to examine phenomena as it appears to show itself to people (Heidegger, 1962/1927). Similarly, IPA is concerned with the accounts that participants provide which reflect *their attempt* to make sense of their experience (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology and hermeneutics both believe that people's interpretations of phenomena are always shaped, limited and enabled by language and culture (Heidegger, 1962/1927). Additionally, they view people's sense-making and meanings to occur in, and as a result of, people's many varied relationships and social interactions with others, which may be refined through self-reflection - referred to as symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934).



Hermeneutic thinking suggests that when interpreting phenomena, the interpreter (researcher) inevitably brings their fore-conceptions (prior experiences, assumptions, preconceptions) to the encounter and that these influence the interpretation (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Spinelli, 1989). Hermeneutics thus highlights that priority should be given to the new phenomena, rather than to one's own preconceptions (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Spinelli, 1989; Smith et al., 2009). Similarly, IPA recognises that access to experience is always dependent on what participants say about that experience, and that the researcher then needs to interpret that account from the participant in order to understand their experience (Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, IPA involves a 'double hermeneutic', where the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of their world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In keeping with hermeneutic phenomenological thinking, IPA acknowledges that in advance of an interview reading, a researcher may not necessarily be aware of all of their pre-conceptions that might influence the analysis, and so recognises that reflective practices are required (Smith et al., 2009). With this in mind, this study acknowledges the role of the researcher in the exploration of men's experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships. This study recognises the need for 'bracketing', or putting to one side the taken-for-granted or customary ways of understanding the world in order to concentrate on the participants' perception of that world (Husserl, 1970, 1982). (See sections 3.6 and 5.3 on reflexivity for further detail)

### ***3.3.3 Epistemological Considerations***

A researcher's chosen methodology must be informed by/consistent with, the researcher's epistemological position (Willig, 2008). Given IPA's phenomenological and hermeneutic roots, it is grounded in critical realism (Reid et al., 2005; Finaly, 2006)

which also seems to make it most suitable for this study. As discussed, critical realism is based on the assumption that phenomenon are perceived and experienced in fluid and subjective ways depending on people's individual personal beliefs and expectations (Bhaskar, 1978; Bunge, 1993; Finaly, 2006). Consequently, research methods connected to phenomenology such as IPA, which seek to capture as closely as possible the way in which a phenomena is subjectively understood and experienced by individuals (Finaly, 2006) seems to follow appropriately. Moreover, since IPA is underpinned by hermeneutic thinking which is critical of the view that it is possible to obtain knowledge outside of an interpretative stance (Heidegger, 1962/1927), it seems to align appropriately with critical realist thinking which also accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to reality (Willig, 2008). This study is therefore not concerned with accurately identifying and measuring an independently existing singular reality, or determining whether participants' accounts may be 'true' or 'false', but will focus on providing a rich and comprehensive description and interpretation of men's subjective experiences and perceptions of the phenomena of 'romantic relationships' which communicates a sense of quality and texture. From within this framework, this study accepts that alternative interpretations are equally valid, but that they do not invalidate the interpretations borne from this study. However, this study acknowledges that interpretations need to be evaluated by assessing the extent to which they are prompted by the meeting of researcher and text (Smith et al., 2009).

#### ***3.3.4 Characteristics of IPA***

Smith (2004) proposed that IPA has three main characteristics. First, IPA is idiographic as it focuses on understanding the individual as a unique, complex entity, and values the detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experience, which are

situated in *particular* contexts. IPA's analytic process maintains a level of focus on what is distinct (i.e. the idiographic study of persons), but will also attempt to balance this against an account of what is shared (i.e. commonalities across a group of participants) in order to produce a fine-grained account of patterns of meaning for participants reflecting on a shared experience (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Given IPA's idiographic concern, it appears further relevant to this study which aims to capture a full and in-depth understanding of men's lived experiences of romantic relationships.

Secondly, IPA is interrogative, as it aims to make a contribution to psychology by illuminating existing literature. While IPA involves an in-depth analysis of a dataset, the results of the analysis do not stand in isolation, but rather are subsequently discussed in relation to the extant psychological literature (Smith et al., 2009). IPA thus appears relevant to this study which aims to add to the growth of understanding in this field, and show how the findings might connect to and complement existing research in the area of men and romantic relationships.

Thirdly, IPA is inductive, as it employs flexible techniques to allow for unanticipated themes to emerge during analysis. IPA researchers do not attempt to verify or negate specific hypotheses established on the basis of extant literature; instead, they construct broader research questions which lead to the collection of expansive data (Smith et al., 2009). Since IPA is inductive, it seems apposite for this study which aims to explore men's subjective experiences and personal meanings of romantic relationships, in order to contribute to richer, new and enhanced understandings in this field.

### **3.4 Conducting IPA**

IPA can be applied to an extensive range of psychological inquiry (Smith et al., 2009). Currently, the majority of published IPA studies lie within the field of health psychology (Smith et al., 2009). Reid et al's', (2005) survey of IPA studies showed that research specifically on men has focused on gay men's sexual health behaviours and revealed a range of powerful and complex meanings and experiences (e.g. Flowers, Smith, Sheeran & Beail, 1997).

IPA aims to design data collection events which elicit the detailed description of experiences, thoughts and feelings from the participants (Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have tended to be the preferred means for collecting such data (Reid et al., 2005).

#### ***3.4.1 Sampling Framework***

Since IPA is always concerned with the detailed examination of lived experience, it uses samples that are selected purposively (Smith et al., 2009). Samples are selected on the basis that they can offer an insight into a particular experience from the perspective of particular people (Smith et al., 2009). Given the aim of this study, heterosexual males aged 30-39, from the general public, who have had experience of a romantic relationship were recruited. This was done using opportunity and snowballing methods. In IPA research participants contacted via opportunities (as a result of one's own contacts), and/or snowballing (where existing participants refer future participants from among their contacts) is the most common, effective and efficient approach to recruit participants (Smith et al., 2009).

### ***3.4.2 Inclusion Criteria***

With IPA, participants are selected on the basis that they can grant access to a particular perspective on the specific phenomena under study (Smith et al., 2009). Since the aim of this study is to capture men's lived experiences of romantic relationships, it follows that participants were selected on the basis that they were all (heterosexual) men (aged 30-39), and that they all had experience of a romantic relationship. They were also required to be fluent in the English language, and willing to talk in detail about their experiences of a romantic relationship.

As discussed in section 1.2, the rationale for exploring the experiences of romantic relationships from a heterosexual male perspective was motivated by a current rise in the number of male clients who present themselves for relationship counselling (Brooks & Good, 2001). Relate's past statistics show that women were more commonly accessing psychological help with regards to relationship issues (Relate, 2009, 2010). However, currently, nearly half of their clients (43%) are now male, with the majority being heterosexual (Relate, 2009, 2010). Additionally, male participants aged 30-39 were used in this study because the most common age group for male relationship counselling clients in the UK falls within this category (Relate, 2009, 2010).

### ***3.4.3 Recruitment of Participants***

Potential participants were given a flyer (see Appendix 1) which contained brief information about the research, inclusion criteria, and researcher's contact details for those willing to take part. Each participant interested in taking part contacted the researcher directly by phone, confirmed meeting the criteria of the study, and gave initial verbalized consent to participate. A venue and time for the interview was then

agreed. When participants arrived for the interview they were presented with an ‘informed’ consent form (see Appendix 2) which they signed. Questions from participants were invited before the interview commenced. Audio recording equipment was used during the interview, with the mean length of interviews lasting 60 minutes. On completion, participants were invited to ask any further questions, and were presented with a debriefing form (see Appendix 3).

#### ***3.4.4 The Participants***

This study used seven male participants. IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes as its primary concern is with a detailed account of individual experience (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al., (2009) proposed that in IPA studies, attention should be given to quality, not quantity, and given the complexity of most human phenomena, studies benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases. They suggest that it is important not to see higher numbers of participants as being indicative of ‘better’ work; data gathering and preparation is intensive, and detailed case-by-case analysis requires time, reflection, and dialogue, whereas larger datasets tend to inhibit this. For these reasons, the number of participants typically used in professional doctorate IPA research is between four and ten (Smith et al., 2009).

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants’ personal profile. The names, precise age, and exact job titles of individual participants are not revealed in accordance with the confidentiality and anonymity process (see section 3.7). Pseudonyms were used throughout.

Participant	Age	Self-Identified Sexuality	Romantic Relationship Experience	Ethnicity	Employment Status	Education attained
Andrew	30-34	Heterosexual	Current – Cohabiting	White, British	Professional job	University educated
Anthony	30-34	Heterosexual	Current – Cohabiting	White, British	Professional job	University educated
Lee	30-34	Heterosexual	Current – not cohabiting	White, British	Professional job	University educated
Mike	30-34	Heterosexual	Previous – Currently not in relationship	White, British	Professional job	University educated
Pete	30-34	Heterosexual	Current – not cohabiting	White, British	Professional job	University educated
Simon	35-39	Heterosexual	Previous – Currently not in relationship	White, British	Professional job	University educated
Tom	30-34	Heterosexual	Previous – Currently not in relationship	Asian, British	Professional job	University educated

**Table 1: Participants' Personal Profile**

As mentioned, purposive sampling was used for this study through which the researcher recruited a sample of participants who shared a common experience and for whom the research question was relevant. As can be seen on Table 1, in relation to the inclusion criteria, all participants identified themselves as heterosexual men who had experience of a romantic relationship. Four participants were currently in romantic relationships (two were cohabiting with their partner, and two were not). None were married. Three participants reported having had previous experience of a romantic relationship but were not currently in one. A majority of participants (six of seven) were aged 30-34.

One was aged 35-39. Other generalities across the sample were that participants were predominantly (six of seven) white British men. One participant was Asian-British. All participants were in professional jobs and had been university educated.

On reflection, the sample could have been more diverse comprising of men from, for example, more diverse ethnicities, more varied jobs, mixed educations and diverse relationship backgrounds (i.e. married, divorced, living with partners, dating). It could be suggested that the lack of male participants from a more varied relational and sociocultural background reflects a difficulty in recruiting a more diverse sample of men. It could also indicate the need for more stringent purposive sampling in future research (e.g. ensuring that each participant has a different ethnicity, job, relationship status and so on, to other participants). (See also section 5.3 for reflexive commentary on sampling)

#### ***3.4.5 Data Collection***

The data collected from each participant included personal information relevant to the inclusion criteria, as well as the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used as this enabled a rich, first-person account of a participant's experience which is in accordance with IPA's guiding principles (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews are considered optimal for gathering rich data as they allow the participant the opportunity to tell their stories, speak freely and reflectively, and develop their ideas and express their concerns at length (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Although interviews of this sort are regarded as a co-determined interaction in its own right, it is important when working in this way to produce an interview schedule in advance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Interview schedules guide



(rather than dictate) the interview, allowing for openness to changes of sequences, and forms of questions, in order to gather more detailed accounts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). They also enable interviewers to plan for any difficulties that might be encountered i.e. it can prepare an interviewer who may be interviewing a reserved and less forthcoming participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

#### ***3.4.6 The Interview Schedule***

The questions asked in the interview were based on the topic under investigation, the gaps in extant literature, and the aim of this study. As will be discussed in sections 3.6 and 5.3, it was recognized that the researchers existing professional and experiential knowledge on the phenomena under investigation inevitably impacted upon the interview and thus the participants' accounts.

In constructing interview schedules, Smith et al., (2009) suggested that interview questions should be prepared so that they are open and expansive, and that verbal input from the interviewer can be minimal. They proposed that interview questions typically move between those which are primarily narrative or descriptive, and those which encourage the participant to be more analytic or evaluative. In accordance with this, the interview schedule starts with the participants being asked to describe their understanding of a romantic relationship in general terms, rather than, for example, more personal and sensitive opening questions. This helps to facilitate a comfortable interaction with them which will in turn enable them to provide a detailed account of the experience under investigation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009), consistent with the aim of this study. Additionally, this approach can help to 'set the scene' - providing an opportunity to invite the participant to expand further (Kvale &

Brinkmann, 2009). The participants were then to be asked about more specific and personal issues, which included their individual experiences and personal perceptions.

The use of pilot interviews can facilitate the development of appropriate open questions for an interview schedule (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). Two pilot interviews with non-participating men known to the researcher took place. These highlighted that questions using terms such as ‘personal perceptions’ were viewed as overly abstract and formal. In order to maintain comfortable interaction and gather a detailed account of participants’ experiences, interview questions were thus revised in which participants were, for example, asked instead, what they understood made ‘good/successful’ or ‘bad/unsuccessful’ romantic relationships. Pilot interviews also facilitated the development of possible probes and prompts that would be used to facilitate elaboration and clarification in the interview. (See Appendix 4 for interview schedule)

#### ***3.4.7 Research and Counselling Interviews***

Since the researcher is positioned as a trainee counselling psychologist, it seemed important to consider the relationship between some qualitative research methods and the practice of counselling psychology. According to Coyle (1998), research interviewing might sometimes be usefully located within a counselling framework. He suggested that the fundamental counselling attributes put forward by Rogers (1951) which include empathy, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard, expressed chiefly through counselling skills which involve active listening, reflecting feelings and using open questions can help to fulfill the interview’s research function. This can help the interviewer to establish rapport with the interviewee, which may in turn promote

open and honest reporting about experiences and feelings by the interviewee (Coyle, 1998). The use of counselling skills can also help the interviewer to obtain detailed information and a clear understanding of the interviewee's experiences and feelings which has been identified as a principle aim of research interviewing (Brenner, 1985; Coyle, 1998).

Although the deployment of counselling attributes and skills are believed to be of some use in the research interview, Coyle (1998) emphasized that the research interview should not be seen as a counselling session. He proposed that research relevant to counselling psychology often addresses sensitive issues which clients may bring to therapeutic sessions. According to Coyle, it can be seen as unethical for a researcher to address sensitive issues with respondents, re-stimulate painful experiences, record them, and then simply depart from the interview situation. He added that it is unreasonable to expect research interviewers to undertake prolonged, formal, therapeutic interventions with interviewees during the interview, and outside of the research context. However, since research often probes sensitive issues which can in turn stimulate difficult memories during the interviews, the interviewer should be prepared to suggest resources that the interviewee might use to work through them, such as appropriate counselling agencies (Coyle, 1998). The participants of this study were fully debriefed at the end of the interviews, which involved presenting them with information about local counselling agencies that they could contact if the interview process caused them any distress.

#### ***3.4.8 Conducting the Interviews***

Interviews were carried out between August and September 2009 at the University of East London, Stratford campus. They were conducted in private interview rooms, during 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday, when the university was staffed. Each participant was settled, given a description of the researcher's position (i.e. a doctoral student in Counselling Psychology), explained the aim of the research and interview, and had the confidentiality policy reiterated (see section 3.7). They were asked to sign the 'informed' consent form, and were invited to ask questions. This contributed to establishing rapport with the participant, essential in obtaining useful data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Subsequently, the audio recorded interview began. During the interview, participants were given time to give full answers and the use of probes and prompts facilitated those who seemed uncertain or restrained, helping them to elaborate. Questions were phrased as openly as possible. This encouraged participants to give deep, reflective accounts in their own words, and avoided making assumptions about their experiences and concerns, or leading them towards particular answers. Given that the participants were understood to be the experiential experts (Smith et al., 2009), the interviewer used the interview schedule flexibly, by considering times when it was preferable to abandon its structure, and to follow the participants' concerns. The use of silence was also employed when required, as it is a useful way to signal that the researcher is waiting for more details (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Throughout this process, the effect of the interview on the participants was continuously monitored which involved being aware of the participants' non-verbal behaviour which indicated any discomfort. No participant indicated distress. Once interviews were completed, participants were

invited to ask questions, were given a copy of the debriefing form, and reminded to use the contact information of counselling agencies given, if required.

An overview of the kinds of discussions that took place during the interviews will now be provided in order to ensure transparency about how the interview questions led to the development of the master themes of this study. As can be seen from Appendix 4, the first main question participants were asked was about their general understanding of a romantic relationship. Participants provided a description of what they perceived constituted a romantic relationship. They described several factors as, for example, two people who share similar interests, and being physically attracted to one another. These contributed to the development of some sub themes. Through the interviewer's use of prompts and probes (see Appendix 4) the participants elaborated on their descriptions. Such factors were seen as significant aspects of initiating romantic relationships. Participants described those as characteristics they searched for, or needed to be present, when initiating their romantic relationships. These responses thus constituted the first master theme: Initiating Romantic Relationships.

The second main interview question asked was about what participants considered made good/successful romantic relationships. Responses included several different factors for example, sex, feeling accepted by their partners, and commitment. These formed other subthemes. With the use of prompts and probes participants talked in more detail about those factors. They were considered good and necessary in a romantic relationship as they were seen as essential to the working, continuation and longevity of romantic relationships. Those responses contributed to the formation of the second master theme: Maintaining Romantic Relationships.

The third main question posed to participants was about what they considered made bad/unsuccessful romantic relationships. They pointed to several factors including jealousy and inequity between partners. These formed further sub themes. Participants elaborated on each of those factors facilitated by the interviewer's use of prompts and probes. Such factors were perceived as being negative elements of romantic relationships because they were seen as the reasons for the breakdown or end of relationships. Those responses constituted the final master theme of this study: Romantic Relationship Deterioration and Dissolution.

#### ***3.4.9 Preparation of Data***

The data for this study was prepared in accordance with Smith et al., (2009) transcription guidelines. Each audio recorded interview was transcribed verbatim, and any identifying information was made anonymous. Each transcript was page-and-line numbered for easy access to relevant extracts. Since IPA aims primarily to interpret the meaning of the content of the participant's account, it does not require a particularly detailed transcription of the prosodic aspects of the recordings (Smith et al., 2009). Each transcript included a note of significant non-verbal utterances (such as laughter), and notable pauses. (Transcripts can be found on the c.d. accompanying this thesis)

#### ***3.4.10 Data Analysis***

Smith et al., (2009) provided a set of guidelines which they suggest facilitate the development of an analysis which is 'good enough'. These guidelines were used to analyse the data and will be illustrated. Smith et al. highlight, however, that they are not prescriptive, that there is no one 'correct' way to do analysis, and that IPA researchers are to be innovative in their approach.

IPA analysis involves reading and re-reading the data. Initial noting was made in the margins of the transcripts which involved commenting on anything of interest or significance in relation to the research aim. Initial notes were then turned into emergent themes. This involved producing a concise statement of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript. Themes were expressed as phrases which captured the psychological essence of the piece. Emergent themes were then clustered together producing super-ordinate themes – a structure which allowed the researcher to point to all of the most interesting and important aspects of each participant's account. Specific ways in which the researcher looked for connections between emergent themes can be found in Appendix 5. All transcripts were analysed in this way. To preserve individuality, it was important to treat each case in its own terms by bracketing the ideas emerging from previous analysis. However, the researcher was inevitably influenced by what had already been found. Connections across cases were made, showing how a theme in one case illuminated a different case and helped identify which themes were most potent. The final result was presented in the form of a table of themes for the group (master themes) showing how the super-ordinate themes (or subthemes) were nested within them (see Appendix 6).

Since analysis involves interpretative work, Smith et al., (2009) proposed that there are different levels of interpretation in IPA, which were considered in this study. IPA researchers, in part, want to adopt an 'insider's perspective' to understand meaning and experience from the participants' view, known as a 'hermeneutics of empathy' (Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers also want to stand alongside the participant to understand their accounts from a different angle, and ask questions over things they are saying, known as a 'hermeneutics of questioning' (Smith et al., 2009). Here, the analysis may

move away from representing what the participant would say themselves and becomes more reliant on the interpretative work of the researcher (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). Smith et al., (2009) highlight that whilst it is useful for a researcher's interpretation to become more questioning, all interpretations must be prompted by close attention to the text itself.

### **3.5 Quality Criteria in Qualitative Research**

An issue that frequently arises in relation to qualitative research concerns its quality. There has been growing dissatisfaction with qualitative research being evaluated according to the criteria traditionally used to assess the scientific value of quantitative research in psychology (e.g. reliability, generalizability, objectivity) (Willig, 2008). Since quantitative and qualitative approaches have such different epistemological underpinnings, many qualitative researchers argue that using this criteria is not meaningfully applicable to qualitative research (McLeod, 2003b; Willig, 2008). Consequently, several guidelines for assessing quality in qualitative research have been produced. Smith et al., (2009) recommended two approaches: Yardley's (2000, 2008) criteria, and Yin's (1989) Independent Audit approach, as they are broad ranging, and can be applied to qualitative research irrespective of their particular theoretical orientation.

Yardley (2000, 2008) presented four broad principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research: sensitivity to context – shown by the researcher in a number of ways, including having an awareness of the existing literature on the topic, and appreciation of the interactional nature of data collection within the interviews; commitment and rigour – demonstrated by the degree of attentiveness paid to the participant during data collection, and the care with which the analysis of each case was



carried out; transparency and coherence – shown through a clear description of the stages of the research process, and the degree of fit between the research and the underlying theoretical assumptions of the approach implemented; and impact and importance – demonstrated through whether the research reported something interesting, important or useful.

Yin's (1989) Independent Audit approach offers a way of thinking about validity in qualitative research. Yin suggested that all the data relevant to the research should be filed in a way that an external person could follow the chain of evidence that led from initial documentation, through to the final report (i.e. initial notes on a research question, a research proposal, an interview schedule, audio tapes, annotated transcripts, tables of themes, draft reports, and the final report). This is often referred to as a 'paper-trail' which forces the researcher to check the rigour of their claims (Yin, 1989).

Furthermore, an independent audit can be conducted where all research material is given to a research supervisor and research peers (Yin, 1989). Their task is to check that the final report is plausible, including collected data and analysis, and that there is a logical step-by-step path through the chain of evidence (Yin, 1989). Both of these guidelines were adhered to throughout this study, and will be discussed further in section 5.4.

### **3.6 Reflexivity**

All qualitative research methodologies recognize that the researcher is implicated in the research process (Willig, 2008). The researcher is a central figure influencing the collection, selection and interpretation of data (Willig, 2008). These are affected by the researcher's prior experiences and understandings (Finaly, 2006). Qualitative researchers must recognize that their behaviour, and the relationships they form with

their participants, have an impact on the participants' responses and thus the findings – research is generally seen as co-constituted, or a joint product of the participants and the researcher and their relationship (Finlay, 2006). Since meanings are negotiated within particular social contexts, other researchers are likely to unfold different accounts (Finlay, 2002).

In order to develop self-awareness of these inter-subjective dynamics, qualitative researchers must engage in reflexive practices (Finlay, 2006). Reflexivity is considered as another important criterion for quality evaluation in qualitative research (Willig, 2008). Additionally, since IPA studies are interested in meaning in context and interpretation, reflexivity is a central concern (Willig, 2008). This involves critical self-reflection, focusing on how a researcher's social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour affect the research process (Finlay, 2006). Consequently, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, and reflexivity issues were explored with a research supervisor and peers. These have been documented. A brief reflection on reflexivity issues follows. A more detailed discussion can be found in section 5.3.

### ***3.6.1 Reflexive Note***

I acknowledge that the research aim, interviews questions, interpretations, and findings of this study may have been influenced by my own experiences and understanding of romantic relationships with men. I also recognise that other personal thoughts and feelings occurring throughout the research process inevitably impacted on this study. My own position as a female trainee counselling psychologist and doctoral researcher may have influenced the participants' responses. My understanding of existing literature in the field of men and romantic relationships could have also played a part in the

research process. I recognise that the findings of this study are the result of the interaction between the participant and myself. To ensure quality and validity, the findings were regularly discussed with a research supervisor and peers, who also checked that interpretations were prompted by the data.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical research practice is a dynamic process which needs to be monitored throughout the course of the research (McLeod, 2003b). To meet ethical research 'start-up criteria', approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of East London (See Appendix 7). The researcher verbally informed each participant as clearly as possible about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the use of data gained. This information was also documented on their consent forms. The researcher ensured that informed consent was obtained from all participants who were clearly reminded that participation was voluntary. The researcher reminded participants throughout the process about their right to refuse to answer particular questions and elect to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences, in which case information collected would be destroyed. No participant refused to answer questions or withdrew from the study. Participants were informed that data provided would remain confidential, and would be safely and securely stored in accordance with the University of East London's Code of Good Practice in Research and the data protection act. Recordings and transcripts were stored on the researcher's personal computer which remained at home and were password protected. Participants were reminded that anonymity was assured and pseudonyms were always used, including in transcripts. All other identifying information in the transcripts was changed. Participants

were fully debriefed at the end of their interviews and were provided with information about appropriate counselling agencies that could be contacted if required.

In the event of adverse effect to the researcher caused during the interviews, these could be discussed with the research supervisor. Safety of the researcher during interviews was improved by being conducted at the University of East London when it was fully staffed. The researcher's supervisor was also informed of the times and dates of each interview.

### **3.8 Summary**

This section reviewed the methodology and method used in this study. IPA, a qualitative research approach, concerned with how people make sense of their lived experiences was chosen. This section also discussed aspects of conducting the research including sampling, data collection, data analysis, quality and reflexivity in qualitative research, and ethical considerations.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships of seven heterosexual men by analysing their accounts drawn from semi-structured interviews using IPA (Smith et al., 2009). In this section the salient themes that emerged during the analysis are illustrated.

Ten subthemes were identified which were grouped into three master themes. The master themes were: Initiating Romantic Relationships, Maintaining Romantic Relationships, and Romantic Relationship Deterioration and Dissolution. Table 2 illustrates the subthemes which are nested within their relevant master themes.

Firstly, an important aspect of the participants' romantic relationships concerned their understanding of why such relationships were established and the factors that contributed to the initial encounters, reflected in the first master theme. Secondly, participants noted several elements which they felt were significant in sustaining their relationships, encapsulated in the next identified master theme. Finally, participants identified a number of key factors that contributed to the deterioration and dissolution of romantic relationships which produced the third master theme.

Overall, the analysis showed that this particular sample of heterosexual men aged 30-39, who were predominantly White, British, well-educated and employed professionals, appeared to make sense of their experiences in varied, specific and complex ways.

The analysis of each master theme and their constituent subthemes draw on extracts from participants' transcripts which provides the evidence to support each theme. As discussed in section 3.7, names and other identifying factors have been changed to

protect the participants' anonymity. Some extracts include the interviewer's questions and responses in order to facilitate understanding of the participants' response. Each extract includes the participants' pseudonym, including the relevant page and line numbers of the original transcript (presented as page/line number).

Master Themes	Sub Themes
Initiating Romantic Relationships	'Needing a Partner' 'Attraction beyond the Physical'
Maintaining Romantic Relationships	'Beyond Romantic Gestures' 'Sex beyond the Physical' 'Making a Commitment' 'Acceptance of a Genuine Self from Partner and Others' 'Retaining Autonomy'
Romantic Relationship Deterioration and Dissolution	'Insecurity and Jealousy' 'Dominant Women' 'Inequity between Partners'

**Table 2: Table of master themes and subthemes**

#### **4.2 Master Theme - Initiating Romantic Relationships**

From the participants' accounts, aspects which influenced the initiation of romantic relationships were identified, including the reasons for establishing those relationships and factors contributing to the initial encounters. In the first subtheme, 'Needing a Partner', participants described their reason for initiating a romantic relationship as fulfilling a personal need for a partner. This need appeared rooted in their struggle with feelings of aloneness. Participants also explained that initiating a relationship was influenced by the existence of social/cultural expectations which went beyond their personal reasons that stressed the need for partnership. In the second subtheme,

‘Attraction beyond the Physical’, participants described physical attraction as significant to the initial encounters influencing the initiation of their relationships, but added that attraction went beyond the physical domain.

#### ***4.2.1 Sub Theme - ‘Needing a Partner’***

When participants were asked about their understanding of a romantic relationship, they referred to their reasons for establishing the relationship. They described possessing a personal need for a partner as a reason for initiating such relationships as illustrated in Anthony’s accounts:

**Anthony:** In a way it’s sort of a bit selfish but I like to have my girlfriend because it’s nice to be with somebody (7/215-217)

**Anthony:** I can’t stay single for very long because, I don’t know, I like having somebody there so well all my relationships have been like a year and a half say two years and then I’ve split up for a couple of weeks and then I find somebody else (20/664-669)

Anthony’s account suggested that being in a romantic relationship meant to “be with somebody” and “have somebody there”. He described moving from one relationship to another with little time in between. His description suggested that he struggled with being alone, and therefore had a strong personal or “selfish” need for a partner to overcome this struggle. Thus, relationship initiation perhaps served to fulfil his need for a partner which defended him from feelings of aloneness and vulnerability.

Similarly, Mike demonstrated a need for a partner illustrated in the following account of starting a relationship with someone overseas:

**Mike:** I started a relationship with someone overseas and that’s, that’s incredibly difficult because you are not with that person, you are not with them at all (5-6/164-168)

**Mike:** It was difficult, very, very difficult. Umm, (pause) one, because of time difference of course so you had to plan your life around it, where you went, what

you did. There was not much time to talk to each other but the good things about it were that you could, you could just talk to somebody (6/183-189)

In his account Mike described the difficulties associated with starting a ‘long distance’ relationship. However, he explained that initiating this relationship was beneficial as it provided him with someone to talk to. Mike’s account seemed to convey a strong need for a partner through his willingness to begin this ‘long distance’ relationship even with associated difficulties i.e. having limited time together. It could be suggested that like Anthony, Mike also struggled with feelings of aloneness and vulnerability.

Interestingly, earlier in the interview Mike explained how he believed it to be inappropriate, or the “wrong reason” to initiate and endure a romantic relationship only to satisfy the need to be with someone. This is illustrated in the following account:

**Mike:** I think there’s a lot of people erm, a hell of a lot of people that get into a relationship for whatever reason, they were drunk one night and you know whatever and stick with it for the wrong reasons, they stick with it because they umm yeah just wanna be with someone. I’m not like that, I don’t want to be with someone for the sake of being with someone (4-5/124-132)

Here, Mike asserted that he did not wish to have a partner “for the sake of being with someone”. This seemed to contradict his previous account and may be explained by a wish to defend himself from a perception of being vulnerable by needing a partner and struggling with feelings of aloneness. This appeared to illustrate his wish to maintain a sense of dominance and invulnerability. Maintaining this sense of dominance appeared to be a common theme in the participants’ accounts, as will be later seen in the analysis of the subthemes ‘beyond romantic gestures’ (section 4.3.1), ‘sex beyond the physical’ (section 4.3.2), ‘making a commitment’ (section 4.3.3), ‘retaining autonomy’ (section 4.3.5), ‘insecurity and jealousy’ (section 4.4.1), and ‘dominant women’ (section 4.4.2).



Hence, this particular sample of men seems to make sense of their experiences in specific ways. It seems that initiating romantic relationships fulfils the participants' need for partnership which protects them from a difficulty with aloneness. At the same time, for some participants such feelings are seen to present them in a vulnerable light – something perceived as undesirable to their sense of selves, and therefore, not to be admitted. The implication of this appears to be that it is important for these participants to maintain a sense of invulnerability and dominance, even when this is challenged, as in this instant, through their need for a partner. This tension between experiencing vulnerability through their struggle with aloneness and a need for a partner, whilst also wishing to present themselves as dominant and invulnerable seems to demonstrate the complexity within their experience of initiating romantic relationships.

Variation in the way participants made sense of their experiences is also evident as some participants perceived the presence of social/cultural expectations that could potentially influence their need for partnership. This is illustrated in an account given by Andrew:

**Andrew:** when you obviously get a little bit older, may be like your parents are saying, oh isn't it about time you got a girlfriend, or whatever like, stop sitting at home in your pants playing computer games, go get yourself a girlfriend, and so there's pressure there (21/782-787)

Andrew's account seemed to confirm the existence of a social/cultural expectation that part of maturing involved having a partner, in contrast to being continuously autonomous and carefree epitomised as someone who "sits at home in his pants playing computer games". Although Andrew and other participants did not explicitly describe complying with this expectation, they emphasised that they believed it existed and could create a feeling of "pressure" to have a partner, leading to the initiation of a romantic relationship.

#### **4.2.2 Sub Theme - ‘Attraction beyond the Physical’**

When describing their experiences of romantic relationships the participants referred to the initial encounters, emphasising that physical attraction was a significant feature of relationship initiation. This is illustrated in Tom’s account:

**Tom:** Right ‘cause I’m looking for a long-term relationship so I always find that, no matter what anyone says, you’ve always got to have a physical attraction there. O.k, it may not necessarily be the highest ranking, but it definitely comes first. ‘Cause that’s what you, you know, first appearances are everything. Erm. It definitely comes first. Erm. This is like when you’re dating, when you’re looking for someone (6/177-186)

Tom described physical attraction as part of the foundations of an enduring and meaningful relationship. For him, physical attraction seemed the trigger which activated the initial encounter, repetitively describing this as something that “comes first”.

Tom went on to explain that physical attraction is something highly personal.

**Tom:** it’s [physical beauty] not a generic beauty but there’s just something there that is, ahh I dunno an individual thing. Something that you can latch on to. Something that you find personally attractive. You can’t really describe it. Umm, yeah, that kind of physical attraction, so it’s gotta be physical attraction there (9/280-286)

Tom explained that physical attractiveness is not a fixed, pre-determined characteristic, or “generic beauty”. His description suggests that physical attraction is complex, and that there may be considerable variation in what different people consider to be physical attractiveness. Furthermore, Tom’s description seemed to illustrate physical attraction as an important characteristic for connecting to partners when he reported that it is something that can be “latched on to”.

Although the participants appeared to emphasise that physical attraction was an important feature of relationship initiation, this particular group of men seem to make sense of their experiences in different ways. Some participants described attraction as

extending beyond the physical domain. For instance, Pete described desirable ‘inner’ qualities of a person as attractive.

**Pete:** I think I’ve always found ah, people who are kind of kind to be ah, very ah, yeah, there’s like kinda warmth there which you know, is attractive I guess. It’s like a nice, it’s nice to be with them, and you could probably imagine umm, building that sort of nest together, you know a comfortable and secure nest, and maybe having children together and things, I think umm, I think ah, I think that’s how I felt when I was growing up and I think ah, I’m sure I look for similar qualities in umm, in women today, and umm, yeah

**Interviewer:** Qualities such as what?

**Pete:** Such as that kind of warm, kindness and umm, you know and not, not just displays to the person that you’re with, but you know, that you can see that they’re like that with their friends and other people so you know it’s not just saved for the relationship (13/453-468)

Pete described expressions of kindness and warmth as attractive qualities in a partner.

He explained that as a child he experienced those qualities from his care-givers. His description seemed to suggest that these created in him a sense of comfort and security.

It could therefore be suggested that his early experiences provided him with a model which, if replicated by a partner in a relationship, he would find attractive and was something he searched for in his adult romantic relationships. He went on to explain that it was the genuine and enduring expression of those ‘inner’ nurturing qualities that was significant and attractive, rather than those that were simply “saved for the relationship”.

Furthermore, some participants also explained that sharing common ground with partners was attractive. This is illustrated in Simon’s account.

**Simon:** Romantic relationship. (Pause) Two people, being together, who enjoy doing the same things, mainly. That’s what I look for.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me more?

**Simon:** Well, I think you should share the same interests and can do things together. I’m not really into all that “I’m doing this today and I’m doing that.” If

you're both off at the same time I think it's nice to do things together. So when I look out for somebody I like to find someone who likes the same things as me, or most things. There's obviously give and take isn't there? But er mostly the same things you can do together (1-2/17-31)

Simon's explanation suggested that relationship initiation involved being attracted to someone who shared similar interests as him. He reported that he was "not really into all that - I'm doing this today and I'm doing that". It could be suggested that sharing similar interests was attractive to him as it facilitated companionship and togetherness with his partner.

In the following account from Pete, he described initiating a romantic relationship with someone who did not share common ground with him.

**Pete:** I think really, we're interested in different things in life. Umm, I quite enjoy learning things and ah, ah, you know quite enjoy studying in a way, you know even though it's laborious, I mean the, the end goal is what I enjoy, what you get out of it. Umm, and I think, umm, we're perhaps, I'm perhaps a bit more ambitious, you know in terms of career, umm so, I suppose the question for me is whether we kind of have enough to sustain a worthwhile relationship (4/133-141)

Perceiving dissimilar interests between him and his partner, Pete appeared to question whether they "had enough" to maintain a "worthwhile" relationship. His account seemed to convey a sense that similarities shared between partners were attractive and important as they could become the substance of, or make a valuable and enduring romantic relationship.

Overall, a significant aspect of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships was about how such relationships began. Features relevant to the initiation of romantic relationships included the participants' need for a partner seen as a significant reason for establishing such relationships, and physical attraction as well as attraction beyond the physical domain.

### 4.3 Master Theme - Maintaining Romantic Relationships

In the participants' accounts, the maintenance of romantic relationships was also considered important to their lived experiences. They described what they considered the most significant features for sustaining such relationships. These are represented by the five identified subthemes. The first subtheme labelled 'Beyond Romantic Gestures' is concerned with participants doing 'meaningful' romantic gestures for their partners as a means of maintaining relationships. The second identified subtheme is: 'Sex beyond the Physical' in which participants described the physical act of sex as a significant aspect for relationship maintenance, and emphasised that this act also had 'deeper' meaning between partners. The third subtheme to be discussed is: 'Making a Commitment' i.e. getting engaged and married. This was seen as a central feature of maintaining their romantic relationships. The fourth identified subtheme is: 'Acceptance of a Genuine Self from Partner and Others'; and finally, the fifth subtheme is: 'Retaining Autonomy'.

#### 4.3.1 Sub Theme - 'Beyond Romantic Gestures'

Participants saw performing romantic gestures for partners as a means of sustaining romantic relationships. This is illustrated in Mike's account:

**Mike:** I'd do romantic things as well, you know, cooking them dinner for one night, just for the hell of it, umm bringing flowers home for no reason, leaving little surprises, just little things like that, just to make sure that they know that I love them. I think people that are in relationships that is, umm that has gotten too, or they've got too comfortable, they don't do those things (21/679-687)

In this account, Mike described the various romantic gestures that he performed for his partner in order to maintain his romantic relationship. His description seemed to communicate a sense that romantic gestures were more than a simple act. Mike

described performing romantic gestures unexpectedly, for example, cooking “for the hell of it”, buying flowers “for no reason”, and leaving “surprises”. His description suggested that it was more meaningful to do romantic gestures which demonstrated thought and effort. This seemed reinforced by his assertion that people who failed to carry out those kinds of romantic gestures were “too comfortable”, something he considered earlier in the interview as being “bad” for a relationship (Mike, 20/666-667).

The participants also described performing romantic gestures that were seen as exceeding conventional ideas because they were more meaningful. This is illustrated in Pete’s account:

**Pete:** You can, you can do like a romantic gesture which ah, umm, may follow some conventions, for example, buying flowers. But ah, for me, I’ve never really seen that as being ‘specially romantic because it’s ah, it’s not a difficult thing to do. You know, I don’t, I don’t know if it shows that much ah, thought, umm, you know you can go to a shop and buy flowers. It’s almost, umm a bit of a cliché really, and ah, I think I prefer more ah, personalised ah, romantic gestures (1/13-21)

In Pete’s description, he compared acts he perceived as traditional romantic gestures such as buying flowers, with “personalised” romantic gestures. His description suggested that conventional gestures are overused, effortless, and meaningless as he explained that they were “not a difficult thing to do” and described them as a “cliché”. In contrast, it appeared that he considered “personalised” gestures as more thoughtful, effortful, and thus more meaningful. He may have made this comparison to exaggerate the inadequacy of conventional gestures, and emphasise the significance and effectiveness of performing meaningful gestures in maintaining romantic relationships.

Although Pete saw performing personalised romantic gestures as something important to maintaining a romantic relationship, he described himself as someone who is less

concerned with becoming involved with this aspect of romantic relationships. This is illustrated in the following account:

**Pete:** Umm, I kinda feel, umm, I just feel as if I'm not as romantic these days

**Interviewer:** How do you know that?

**Pete:** How do I know that? Umm, I feel as if I don't really put that much effort into, you know, that side of things (2/67-72)

Here, Pete asserted that he was "not as romantic these days" and said "I don't really put that much effort into... that side of things". This seemed to contradict his previous account and may be explained by a wish to avoid being perceived as 'a romantic' who wanted to demonstrate his thought and efforts for his partner, but instead wished to present himself as a macho and dominant man. Consequently, there appears to be tension within Pete's experience between viewing the performance of meaningful romantic gestures as significant to sustaining romantic relationships, whilst simultaneously wishing to present himself as non-romantic, macho and dominant. This seems to demonstrate the complexity of this participant's experiences of maintaining romantic relationships.

#### ***4.3.2 Sub Theme - 'Sex beyond the Physical'***

When explaining their understanding of romantic relationships, the participants described sex as a fundamental element in the maintenance of these relationships. This is illustrated in Pete's account:

**Pete:** there's the physical aspect, you know, it's important for me to be attracted to, you know, the person really, umm, and that we have ah, a good physical relationship

**Interviewer:** And, and what are you basing that on? Like, how do you know that these are important?

**Pete:** Umm, it's almost like a, umm, it's almost like my mind, my body tells me if I feel something is neglected umm, ah, or if there's like a lack of something then, I'll feel uncomfortable (13-14/482-491)

Pete described the physical act of sex as highly important to him. He recalled that a lack of sex created an undesirable bodily reaction, as he explained that "my body tells me if something is neglected... I'll feel uncomfortable". His description suggested that for him, sex was a physical act that satisfied a bodily need. For his relationship to continue, sex seemed to be an essential component. Understanding sex in this way, Pete appears to avoid presenting himself as in need of others, or of intimacy, but driven by physiology and male virility. The complexity of this participant's experiences is illuminated here since Pete's concern with presenting himself in this way is experienced at the same time as he presents himself in a conflicting, less macho way, demonstrated in other subthemes such as in 'beyond romantic gestures', where he showed that he placed importance on performing romantic gestures for partners to maintain relationships; in 'making a commitment' where he expressed his belief that commitment to a partner was necessary for a relationship to progress; and in 'inequity between partners' where the importance that Pete placed on equitable practices within relationships was shown.

This particular sample of heterosexual men appeared to variously make sense of their experiences. As participants elaborated their accounts, some described sex as something exceeding a physical act. This is illustrated in Tom's accounts:

**Tom:** you start like, yeah, developing a sexual relationship, be it starting off with kissing or whatever, but then, yeah so that's it, I think it's when you're just, you're in a proper relationship (1/20-24)

**Tom:** you involve the physicality's of a relationship, and then that's when I think, then you sort of erm, you can say you're in a relationship with the person (4/100-103)



Tom described sex as an act that defined a romantic relationship by reporting that a sexual relationship equated to a “proper” relationship. His description seemed to convey a sense that sex was a kind of milestone that indicated a meaningful and enduring romantic relationship.

Alternatively, some participants saw sex as an important means of expressing their feelings for their partners, thereby exceeding being merely a physical act. This is illustrated in Anthony’s account:

**Anthony:** the sex life has got to be good, because I think that can ruin a relationship or make an unsuccessful one.

**Interviewer:** What is important about that to a romantic relationship in your opinion?

**Anthony:** It’s your way of showing each other how you feel. There’s something about that that’s passionate and it’s a moment between yourselves erm and I think. Well, like I said to you, I’m not intimate. I’m not cuddly cuddly or kissy all the time. So it sounds a bit crude really when I think about it, but that moment that you’re in, you lose your inhibitions and you can really show somebody what they mean to you and I think having them moments, if you haven’t got them in your relationship because one person doesn’t want to have sex or whatever then what have you got really to show your passion. I can give you a kiss or whatever but it’s not the same is it? So that’s why I think it’s important. (16/508-531)

In his account, Anthony began by explaining how a lack of sex could “ruin” a romantic relationship, which seemed to reinforce the importance of sex in relationship maintenance. Anthony described sex as allowing him, as someone “not intimate”, to lose his inhibitions and show his partner what she meant to him, thereby suggesting that he is usually self-conscious, emotionally controlled or inexpressive. For Anthony, sex appears as an important means of being emotionally expressive towards his partner. This firstly seemed to amplify the importance of sex being more than simply a physical act in the maintenance of romantic relationships; and secondly, shows the complexity within Anthony’s experience by illustrating the tension he encountered between

retaining an inclination to be emotionally inexpressive - appearing to uphold a macho and dominant position, whilst at the same time disconnecting from this position by regarding sex as a means for him to express his emotions.

Furthermore, some of the participants perceived the existence of a social/cultural expectation about sex in romantic relationships. This is illustrated in Andrew's account:

**Andrew:** the amount of stuff that's written in like girls magazines and stuff like that, as to how to keep a relationship successful and whatnot, you've only gotta read a few of those magazines to, to realise that if that's what, say, females are reading like day in day out, umm, that no wonder they have certain expectations or, or

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me more about this?

**Andrew:** I regularly like read Lucy's magazines, like Glamour magazine, all the time and, and the amount of times that they'll put something in there about top ten ways to keep your man, top ten like sex tips to to do whatever, like to blow his mind in bed and whatever else, and you think that they might not have, it's something that they might not have experienced themselves before, like some of the points that they say like you should do or, or things you should say, and so there's gotta be a weight of expectation from, from there and, I dunno, some, some, some people might take that as verbatim like, that is what, oh the magazine said so, then that is what I'll do (19-20/714-737)

Andrew explained that the media, particularly popular magazines, often created expectations about the nature of sex in order to maintain a "successful" romantic relationship. His account, particularly the use of the metaphor "weight of expectation", seemed to suggest that those expectations could create an undesirable pressure on people to conform. However, he subsequently reported that sex performed in accordance with social/cultural expectations became "something you don't really mean" (Andrew, 20/751-752). This could be interpreted as meaning that for him, conforming to those expectations resulted in sex becoming impersonal and meaningless, something that he was against and perhaps did not comply with. His description implied that in

maintaining his romantic relationships, it was important for sex to be personal and meaningful rather than socially prescribed.

#### ***4.3.3 Sub Theme - 'Making a Commitment'***

Participants identified making a commitment, a factor, when explaining their understanding of romantic relationships and relationship maintenance. They portrayed this as enabling the relationship to progress. This was alluded to in Pete's account:

**Pete:** commitment phobia is not conducive to ah, a romantic relationship (laughs). You know, it gets in the way. (11/389-391)

Interestingly, although Pete saw making a commitment as allowing romantic relationships to continue, he described himself as someone who was unlikely to make a commitment in his own relationships. This is illustrated in the following accounts:

**Pete:** I just can't ever imagine settling down and getting married to someone (10/352-353)

**Pete:** I don't know if I'll ever be ready [to commit]. I'd like to think that may be a few years time, I will meet someone, and I'll be like, o.k. yeah, I've had enough fun (10/366-369)

Here, Pete asserted that he "can't ever imagine settling down and getting married to someone" and said "I don't know if I'll ever be ready [to commit]". This, and his claim that in time he might meet someone and commit to them, but only once he has "had enough fun", seems to present him as 'a bit of a lad' who is mainly independent, carefree and permissive. Those extracts seemed to contradict his previous account and may be explained by a wish to avoid being perceived as in some way dependent on others, with less freedom, and thus enable him to maintain a sense of machismo and empowerment. Consequently, within Pete's experience there appears to be a tension between believing that making a commitment enables romantic relationships to continue, whilst at the same time wishing to present himself as macho, independent and

a permissive man who is unlikely to make a commitment. This demonstrates the complexity of his experiences of maintaining romantic relationships.

Making a commitment was commonly identified by the participants as getting engaged, and married. Although they described this as significant to sustaining an evolving romantic relationship, participants also considered this to be more of an idea or need initiated by their partner. This is illustrated in Lee's account:

**Lee:** she got to a point where it was like, you know where are we going and stuff, I mean, I'm sure she would have said at some point, about you know, with getting engaged, it's like yeah, is anything gonna happen, she's gonna feel like she's wasting her time if nothings gonna happen (17/623-628)

Lee explained that making a formal commitment was a significant need of his partner when he reported that "*she* got to the point" where she considered getting engaged. This need appeared to create in him a sense of uncomfortable pressure and urgency to comply. He reported that "she's gonna feel like she's wasting her time if nothings gonna happen". For him, making a commitment was perhaps undertaken because of this perceived pressure from his partner. The complexity of the participants' experiences seems to be emphasised here. Lee's experience in which his partner's influential authority and dominance seems evident, appears to be in conflict with other elements of his relationship experience when there has been a significant need for him to retain a sense of dominance and machismo in relation to his partner (through maintaining independence), as is illustrated in the subtheme 'retaining autonomy' (section 4.3.5).

The variety of ways in which this particular sample of men experienced this aspect of maintaining romantic relationships is further demonstrated as some perceived the need to make a commitment as originating from wider social or cultural ideas. This is illustrated in Simon's accounts:

**Simon:** she wanted to get married and have kids at an early age, which I thought was like a small town mentality from where I was from, everyone seems to be doing it and I see a lot of these people that are divorced now and they're single parents (7/223-228)

**Simon:** most people I meet are about my own age and they seem to be in a rush to get married and have a family. Whereas I don't think you should just do it. You know, I think you should see if you're right for each other. (5/155-160)

Like Lee, Simon explained that making a commitment was more his partner's desire than his own. He further explained that this was based on a "small town mentality" or social/cultural norm that "everybody seems to be doing". His reference to the prevalence of divorce and single-parents seemed to communicate a sense that, for him, conforming to the tradition of engagement and marriage could be unsuccessful, meaningless, and may be no longer pertinent. His view seemed to be that making a commitment should be based on personal thoughts and feelings about his partner and their relationship, rather than conformity to a social/cultural norm and expectation that "you should just do". This appears to resonate with the previous sub-theme (in section 4.3.2) in which Andrew viewed sex as an impersonal and meaningless act when it was performed to conform with social/cultural ideas. Both sex, and making a commitment, they suggested should be personal and meaningful instead of being socially prescribed.

Pete appeared to emphasise that to sustain a romantic relationship, making a commitment should be based on the couple's feelings for one another.

**Pete:** these days you know, umm, you know people don't have to be so committed to each other you know, I think a couple of generations ago ah, there was like a, I think relationships had more of a, a co-dependent feature.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean by that?

**Pete:** Because, women didn't work, and men couldn't cook and clean and do all that kind of stuff, you know it was just very, you know along those very traditional lines, and so, there was like a need for each other, and umm, you know, now, I mean, ah, both you know male and female work, both can cook and clean and look after themselves, and umm so I think when there's that, I think it has to be more about, cos there's less sort of practical reasons to be

together, it's, it does mean it's more about enjoyment together, and love, and ah just really wanting to be with each other, umm, and I think there could be lots of pressures which can rock that relationship, you know, because there are so many single people around umm, umm, and perhaps umm, ah, morals have maybe changed you know, to, to have a divorce or leave a relationship is not like as frowned upon as it was like generations ago (16/556-577)

Pete compared traditional and contemporary romantic relationships. He described commitment in traditional relationships as being based on “practical reasons”. His description conveyed a sense that in traditional romantic relationships, making a commitment was a necessary process and inevitable. In comparison, commitment in contemporary romantic relationships was founded less on necessity and practicality, and more on “enjoyment together”, “love”, and “wanting to be together”. By making this comparison, Pete stressed the importance of making a meaningful and reciprocal commitment, based on the couple's feelings and desire to be together.

Furthermore, Pete saw the absence of any necessity to make a commitment, and in addition viewed the current social/cultural climate in which divorce was common and accepted, coupled with a rise in ‘single’ people, as “pressures which can rock that relationship”, making it easier for any commitment to be broken. Thus, for him, making a commitment in contemporary romantic relationships seemed a challenging and fragile process. This may also explain his struggle and reluctance to make a commitment in previous romantic relationships, described earlier in the analysis of this subtheme.

#### ***4.3.4 Sub Theme - ‘Acceptance of a Genuine Self from Partner and Others’***

Participants explained that feeling accepted by their partners for being genuine and open contributed to the intimacy, closeness, and maintenance of their romantic relationships.

This is illustrated in Pete's accounts:

**Pete:** feeling comfortable so you can just be yourself you know, umm, ah, yeah, that's important (8/269-271)

**Pete:** if they accept you, yeah, it's about acceptance I guess, umm, if the other person accepts you and you accept them, you're more likely to be free. And you know, if you're free then, you can just, yeah, you feel liberated and you feel like you can say things and do things, and you know, you won't be kind of judged, and it will contribute to a more powerful relationship, cos you're sharing more cos there's more intimacy there (8/278-285)

Pete pointed out the importance of being genuine and open in his romantic relationship which, for him, could be interpreted as a means of sharing, or offering parts of himself to his partner. He emphasised the importance of acceptance from his partner of an authentic and open self. His account suggests that the acceptance of his offering (of himself) enabled him to feel closeness and intimacy with his partner. This created a stronger, "more powerful" relationship, contributing to its maintenance.

Similarly, Anthony described the acceptance by his partner of him being genuine and open as desirable and a unique experience, creating an exclusive closeness between them.

**Anthony:** I think you've got to be able to like I can be really stupid with my girlfriend but it's the sort of things you do together your own little jokes that you'd never catch me doing in front of my mates or at work or anything but it's nice to have that, and if you know you can do it with them (6/194-200)

Anthony's account conveyed a sense that it was necessary for him to feel free and genuine in his romantic relationship to the extent of being "really stupid", and that this was accepted by his partner. This seemed necessary as he seldom felt free to behave genuinely and spontaneously outside of his romantic relationship, as exemplified by his assertion that this was not something his friends or colleagues would "catch" him doing. Anthony's romantic relationship appeared to provide him with an arena where he felt liberated, real, and accepted – an experience unique to him. This enabled him and his partner to experience an *exclusive* closeness which contributed to the maintenance of their relationship.

Participants further felt that in addition to partners, acceptance of themselves by ‘significant others’ contributed to the maintenance of relationships. Participants envisaged those ‘significant others’ would inevitably be brought into the relationship since they were seen as essential to their partners’ lives. This is illustrated in Andrew’s account:

**Andrew:** the relationship should be between me and her, but I think it’s hard not to factor in whatever else she brings with her. And if that’s, and obviously that includes her family. So, I mean, personally I’m fortunate that I get on, I mean I worked with her step-dad for years before I even met her, and I got on really well with him and, yeah they’re really nice people, her brothers and sisters and extended family, like have accepted me (14/515-523)

Acceptance from ‘significant others’ was seen by participants as a source of support for partners and themselves, a feature which also contributed to the maintenance of relationships. This seemed implied in Lee’s account:

**Lee:** if I didn’t get on with her parents, you know, we’d have to have a really strong relationship with just the pair of us, for us to probably stay together (7-8/258-261)

Lee explained that without acceptance from the extended family, his partner and him would need to have “a really strong relationship with just the pair of us” to stay together. This acceptance from his partner’s family appeared to provide a valuable source of support and strength, facilitating them to remain together, thus enabling their relationship to continue.

#### ***4.3.5 Sub Theme - ‘Retaining Autonomy’***

The participants emphasised that for romantic relationships to continue, it was important to have a degree of independence. Although explaining that a significant feature of their romantic relationships was the ‘togetherness’ shared with partners which was most intense during the initial stages, they explained that as the relationship



developed it became necessary for them to retain some autonomy even though togetherness was highly valued. This is illustrated in Lee's account:

**Lee:** in the first few years it was like yeah, we can spend like 24/7 together and not get bored of each other and just talk loads of rubbish to each other and, but you know entertaining each other and have a great time, umm, but then when she came back [from university] it was completely different, it was like, I now feel like I need my own time and my own space, and you know, it's not like, I can't spend 24/7 together, I can spend a lot of time together and do nice things but at the same time it gets to the point where it's like yeah I need a bit, just chill out Lee time, to do what I wanna do (16/586-596)

Lee explained that his romantic relationship initially consisted of him and his partner spending all of their time together. Whilst acknowledging the importance of this, he described feeling the need for independence. In his account, he used the phrase "24/7" to describe how much time they initially spent together. The repetitive use of this phrase seemed to exaggerate their co-presence, conveying a sense that it was constant, consuming and thus undesirable. Perhaps for Lee this was restricting and meant the relinquishment of some independence and control which appeared to be important for him to maintain. This is supported by his assertion of needing "Lee time, to do what I wanna do". For him, maintaining a sense of autonomy and control seemed a necessary contributory factor in sustaining his romantic relationship.

Anthony also explained that to maintain a "good relationship" it was important to maintain some independence and described the effects of this when it was absent.

**Anthony:** I think to make a good relationship you have to have your own space otherwise you end up too clingy with each other (4/129-132)

**Anthony:** I've seen in the past with other girlfriends where they've done that themselves, isolated themselves from their friends, and just wanted to spend all their time with me. Where as I'd still be going out but they'd still be waiting at home for me, and...

**Interviewer:** What was that like for you?

**Anthony:** It was hard, because I then felt guilty for seeing my friends and then I felt sorry for them because it's like you haven't got a life, you're just sitting around waiting for me to come home or whatever erm. I don't really know where I'm going with that. I just think you need to have your time as well as time with each other, but their needs to be a healthy balance (5/140-156)

Anthony's account suggested that without autonomy he would become "too clingy" and overly-dependent on his partner. His descriptions communicated a sense that such behaviour portrayed an undesirable sign of weakness. This appeared to be reinforced when he recalled his story about feeling "sorry" for a previous partner whom he perceived as overly dependent on him, and also feeling "guilty" for leaving her alone when he wished to see his friends. Maintaining some autonomy was perhaps his way of avoiding being seen as 'weak', suggesting that it was important for him to maintain a sense of dominance (as opposed to weakness) relative to his partner, a factor which may have contributed to him remaining in the relationship. Furthermore, he explained the need for a "healthy" balance of independence and togetherness in his romantic relationship. His use of the word "healthy" seemed to amplify his need to retain some autonomy by presenting it as something that was fundamental to his well-being.

Thus, for this sample of men it seems that part of maintaining romantic relationships involved retaining autonomy, which was perceived as enabling participants to maintain a sense of control and to avoid being seen as dependent on others, and therefore weak. The implication of this appears to be that for these participants it was important to maintain a sense of dominance in their relationships through retaining a degree of autonomy. The participants' experiences appear more complex however, since at the same time as wishing to retain autonomy as a way to maintain a sense of dominance, they also adopted a less dominant position, as in the case of Lee and Anthony they expressed their need for, and willingness to engage in togetherness with partners. This dialectic seems apparent within this subtheme, but also between this subtheme (through

which the wish to retain independence is evident) and the ‘needing a partner’ subtheme (section 4.2.1 – through which the need to be with someone can be seen).

In sum, participants saw the maintenance of romantic relationships as a key aspect in their lived experiences and perceptions of such relationships. The features of relationship maintenance that were important to them included performing ‘meaningful’ romantic gestures for partners, the physical act of sex including sex which conveyed ‘deeper’ meanings between partners, making formal commitment, being open, genuine, and accepted by partners and ‘significant others’, and participants’ retention of a level of autonomy.

#### **4.4 Master Theme – Romantic Relationship Deterioration and Dissolution**

The deterioration and dissolution of romantic relationships were also considered significant to the participants’ lived experiences and perceptions of these relationships. Participants described the most significant features of the deterioration and dissolution of romantic relationships. These are represented by three identified subthemes which will be discussed: ‘Insecurity and Jealousy’, ‘Dominant Women’ in which participants perceived their partners as possessing and exerting power over them, and ‘Inequity between Partners’.

##### ***4.4.1 Sub Theme - ‘Insecurity and Jealousy’***

Participants saw feelings of insecurity and jealousy as contributing to the deterioration and dissolution of their romantic relationships, and made sense of this in specific ways. An account provided by Andrew illustrates how his own insecurity featured in his romantic relationship, and possibly contributed to its deterioration.

**Andrew:** when I was much younger, I was going out with someone who was probably more experienced than me. I knew that she had been with older guys and I suppose instantly that sort of played on my mind a bit.

**Interviewer:** How did it do that?

**Andrew:** Well, constantly wondering whether I'd measure up in more ways than one (laughs) to whatever her previous relationship was (4/114-122)

Andrew described being with a partner who he perceived as having had more “experience” romantically than him. This resulted in him “constantly wondering” whether he would “measure up”. He experienced feelings of a lack of self-confidence and insecurity. However, significantly, Andrew was careful to point out at the beginning of his account that this episode occurred when he was “much younger”. It could be suggested that by qualifying his account, he was defending himself from being seen as continually insecure and lacking in self confidence. The implication of this is that these are negative and undesirable to him, and could contribute to the deterioration of his relationships. The importance of maintaining a strong sense of authority and self confidence in his romantic relationships is therefore highlighted.

Furthermore, some participants saw jealousy as another factor that led to the deterioration and dissolution of romantic relationships. This is illustrated in one of Andrew's accounts in which he described his own experience of jealousy.

**Andrew:** from my experience jealousy is gonna be, definitely be the downfall of my first sort of semi-serious relationship.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me about that?

**Andrew:** Umm, yeah just that, I dunno, it snowballs, snowball effect, I mean they might not give you any reason to necessarily doubt them at the start but, you let something play on your mind, and it would just snowball into something much bigger and, and I probably talk myself into more, I probably imagined more scenarios then, then probably actually ever did or ever would happen, (coughs) and umm (pause) yeah and ultimately I think that that just takes over and (pause) it just suffocates the relationship (11/385-400)

Andrew saw jealousy as a major contributor to the deterioration or “downfall” of romantic relationships, adding that it was something which “snowballs”. His repetitive use of this metaphor could suggest that for him, jealousy was uncontainable and increased rapidly in strength and effect. Additionally, Andrew appeared to experience jealousy as something irrational and uncontrollable as he explained that his partner might not have given him any reason to feel it. Furthermore for him, jealousy was experienced as overwhelming to the extent that it “takes over” and “suffocates” him and the relationship.

Therefore for Andrew, insecurity, jealousy and accompanied feelings of a lack of control contributed to romantic relationship deterioration and dissolution. The implication of this appears to be that in his relationships it was important for him to maintain a sense of self-confidence and control. However, this seems to be in conflict with his initial experience where he described possessing feelings of insecurity and jealousy. This appears to demonstrate the complexity of his experience of deterioration and dissolution in romantic relationships.

Some participants described how distrust created by their partners’ jealousy and insecurity contributed to the deterioration and dissolution of their relationships. This is illustrated in Pete’s account:

**Pete:** I think insecurity is a big factor, you know if, if, someone’s not feeling very secure in a relationship then that’s gonna show itself in, numerous ways, and ah, umm, if they’re not sure about umm, you know your, fidelity then, umm, you know they might just start, ah challenging you more often about it or, you know, keeping tabs on you, or ah.

**Interviewer:** Can you give me an example?

**Pete:** Umm, (pause) like ah, (pause) yeah, yeah, if ah, if I go out to meet a friend, who’s a girl, then that’s always a big (laughs) that’s always really difficult. Umm, so.

**Interviewer:** What makes it difficult?

**Pete:** I think, because umm, there's an assumption there that it's not just about friendship, and I guess it comes down to how people perceive, umm, well, is it possible to meet up with someone, well my experience is in like heterosexual relationships, but, so (inaudible), but if you go out with someone of the opposite sex, umm, is it possible just to be friends, you know, umm, I mean, I, I, see I think it is, umm, because I have friends who, you know, who are female and ah, there isn't like, there's never been any kind of, sexual relationship, there's no like intention, you know, for there to be one. But I think that can be difficult for some people to accept. Umm, umm.

**Interviewer:** And, and what's that like for you?

**Pete:** Umm, well I guess in a way it makes me feel, a bit guilty about something that I'm innocent of. Umm, and causes me to sort of, question, you know, umm, question whether I should ah, accept an invitation to meet up with a friend or, you know just thinking about all the potential repercussions that might occur as a result and, umm, which you know, I mean it's not a good sign really cos, I don't think this kind of relationship I'd wanna be in really, where I can't feel I'm fairly free to go out and meet friends (9-10/314-348)

Pete suggested that his partner's insecurity could have led to deterioration in their relationship. For him, this insecurity showed itself in his partner's distrust in him as he reported that she started "challenging" him about his fidelity and found it "difficult" to accept his friendships with other females, leading him to feel "guilty" for something he was "innocent" of. For Pete, this distrust further led to a loss of control over the things he did. He reported that she began "keeping tabs" on him, making him feel restricted in meeting female friends, especially when he contemplated "all the potential repercussions". His partner's insecurity, manifesting as distrust and control, was seen as contributing to the deterioration and dissolution of the relationship. He reported that their presence were "not a good sign" and declared that "I don't think this kind of relationship I'd wanna be in where I can't feel I'm fairly free to go out and meet friends". For Pete, it seemed important to maintain a sense of control in his romantic relationships. This can also be related to the next sub-theme to be discussed (section 4.4.2).

#### ***4.4.2 Sub Theme - ‘Dominant Women’***

Participants described their partners as possessing and exerting power and dominance in their relationships which created in them undesirable feelings. This appeared to contribute to the deterioration and dissolution of their romantic relationships and is illustrated in Mike’s account:

**Mike:** there’s been a lot more powerful women, which is good and bad, because it means it empowers women, which I think is a good thing umm because umm I certainly don’t see them any differently to men, they’re just people, you know, umm in terms of umm who I work with and things like that. But it is bad in that women have got a lot more, maybe a bit too confident (17-18/567-575)

Mike described his romantic relationships with women as occasionally being a negative or difficult experience. For him, women in romantic relationships were seen as “more powerful” and “too confident”. Such attributes were described as “bad” as they may have created in him feelings of intimidation, vulnerability and weakness which were undesirable to him, and consequently could have contributed to the deterioration and dissolution of his romantic relationships. This implied that for Mike it was important to maintain a sense of empowerment and dominance (instead of intimidation, vulnerability and weakness) in relation to his partner. This appeared to be a common thread in other participants’ experiences demonstrated in the remainder of the analysis of this sub-theme. The complexity of Mike’s experience can be illuminated through his need to retain a sense of empowerment and dominance which was experienced at the same time as he connected with conflicting, less powerful and non-macho positions. Those are highlighted in the analysis of other themes such as in the ‘needing a partner’ subtheme where Mike’s need for partnership and his struggle to be alone is evident; and the ‘beyond romantic gestures’ subtheme through which the importance Mike placed on being ‘a romantic’ was shown.

For Anthony, his partner's power and domineering characteristics were expressed through the exertion of control over what he was able to do whilst in the relationship.

**Anthony:** Men do find that they have to warm their girlfriends before they can say 'Right I'm going out tonight.' Whereas Laura will say to me "I'm going out next week" on whatever day "going out drinking" or whatever, I'll go "alright". There's no questions at all, and when you speak to other men it's the same, they all do the same thing, they all try to make it sound that it's alright. They feel guilty about going out for some reason, and they talk, warm their girlfriends up before you say it. So you'll be like "we're not doing anything etc etc" before even asking if I can see my friends. Whereas women, I feel, will just say it and we'll go "alright". That's a difference I think that maybe it's just all the girlfriends I've had. They always seem to question you on what you're doing rather than just letting you get on with it and then the next day after you've been out there'll be more questions (11/347-366)

**Interviewer:** And what's that been like for you?

**Anthony:** Erm. It's annoying because you think you should just be allowed to do what you want erm and 'cause I know the way I am, I don't question anything, well crack on if you want to do that do that. If you want to go away for like.. I could never just say I'm going away for a weekend and that'll be fine. There'd be questions questions questions (11-12/370-379)

In his romantic relationship, Anthony saw his partner as having more freedom than him. He considered her able to assert herself freely when he explained that she "will say to me, I'm going out next week" without expecting to be challenged. In contrast, he explained needing to take certain measures before embarking on things he wished to. He described having to "warm up" his partner, adding that he "could never just say, I'm going away for a weekend and that'll be fine". Whenever he socialised without her he was always questioned. Anthony's descriptions conveyed a sense that he required permission from her to do things, and that she exerted a strong sense of influence and control. It seemed that this created in him feelings of restriction, lacking control and disempowerment leading him to declare that "you should just be *allowed* to do what you want". Anthony saw this experience as being general, reporting that "when you speak to other men it's the same". This generalisation may have served to make the



effects of his partner's behaviour more tolerable, thereby highlighting how difficult it may have been for him initially, demonstrating its contribution towards the deterioration and dissolution of his relationships. This implies that it was important for Anthony to retain a sense of empowerment and control in relation to his partner in his romantic relationships.

Participants viewed the pressure exerted on them by partners to change aspects of themselves as another example where power and dominance were lost to them, and highlighted that this also contributed to the deterioration or dissolution of their romantic relationships. This is illustrated in another of Anthony's accounts:

**Anthony:** if I'd had a row and Laura had told me to change, or things like that, before in past relationships I wouldn't bother, if I'm not good enough, I'll go, just leave the relationship, because I didn't feel happy being told to change (15/486-491)

Anthony experienced feeling pressured by his previous partner to change aspects of himself. This seemed to have created in him an undesirable sense of being controlled as he reported feeling unhappy about "being *told* to change". This lack of control was seen as a contributor to the dissolution of his relationship when Anthony explained that being told to change led him to leave. This pressure to change which led to the dissolution of his relationship resonates with the 'acceptance of a genuine self from partners' subtheme within the 'relationship maintenance' master theme, discussed in section 4.3.4. Overall, Anthony's description here seems to imply that it was important for him to maintain a sense of authority and control, as well as being accepted as he is.

The complexity of the participants' experiences is demonstrated furthermore since Anthony's need to retain a sense of dominance and control was concurrent with dialectic, less dominant and non-macho experiences. These are illustrated in the analysis

of other subthemes including ‘needing a partner’ and ‘retaining autonomy’, where his need for partnership and willingness to engage in togetherness, as well as his struggle when alone is evident; and ‘sex beyond the physical’ where for him, sex was perceived as a means of being emotionally expressive towards his partner.

#### ***4.4.3 Sub Theme - ‘Inequity between Partners’***

Participants described occasions in their romantic relationships when the efforts from partners to maintain their relationship were not equal. For these participants, inequity was seen to contribute to the deterioration and dissolution of their romantic relationships in specific ways. This is illustrated in Lee’s account:

**Lee:** it’s a two way thing isn’t it obviously, you know if it’s one person doing all the running then, eventually they’re gonna get a bit annoyed about that aren’t they (13/480-483)

Lee described inequity in his romantic relationship as “one person doing all the running”. His description, including his use of this metaphor suggests that for him, inequity is an arduous process creating negative feelings which contributed to the deterioration of his romantic relationships. Lee pointed out the importance of equity, describing romantic relationships as a “two-way thing”. For him, equity seemed so fundamental that he described its presence as something which was obvious. By offering this account, Lee emphasised the inappropriateness of inequity in romantic relationships. The complexity of the participants’ experiences is highlighted here since Lee’s concern with equity with his partner is experienced whilst he also connects with a more macho and dominant position to his partner, demonstrated in the ‘retaining autonomy’ subtheme where it was important for him to maintain some independence, seen as his way of retaining a sense of control and superiority in his relationships.

Tom described inequity as a negative factor leading to an unsuccessful romantic relationship, particularly when it evolved into a continuous process creating undesirable emotions in partners.

**Tom:** if you've got one person who's constantly demanding and the other person who's constantly giving, sometimes the situation can arise where when the person who's always giving wants something in return and if you don't, if he or she doesn't get it then that's just, if that's the first time then I think it's the first step where you start developing negative feelings which will just grow and grow (14/447-455)

Tom's description of inequity in his romantic relationships was portrayed as "one person who's constantly demanding and the other person who's constantly giving".

Tom's description, particularly his repetitive use of the word "constantly" suggests that on-going inequity was particularly destructive, elucidating that it could in turn produce on-going "negative feelings" which would progressively exacerbate, and contribute to the deterioration and dissolution of his romantic relationships.

Pete emphasised that inequity contributed to relationship deterioration and dissolution, as well as negatively affected his sense of well-being.

**Pete:** trying to ah accommodate the other person's needs, but if it feels like you're doing it to the extent that your own needs are being neglected, umm then I think the relationship becomes unbalanced and, I think that's not healthy, umm, ah, you know you only got one life, I think umm, it's not umm, (pause), umm, ideally if I'm gonna spend some time with someone, I'd like it to be in a balanced, you know, mutual, mutually ah, fulfilling relationship (17/610-618)

For Pete, inequity was seen as creating an "unbalanced" relationship which he considered as "not healthy". Here, he emphasised the detriments of inequity by presenting it as something that could even affect his health and well-being. Moreover, in his account he seemed to communicate a critical sense of time by reporting that "you only got one life". From this description, inequity seemed to create a relationship which was meaningless and not worth his while, highlighting further how it might contribute

to the deterioration of his romantic relationship. This suggests that for Pete, it was important for both parties in a relationship to provide equal effort, and his description of wanting a “balanced” and “mutually fulfilling relationship” seemed to support this.

Again, the complexity of the participants’ experiences is illuminated here since Pete’s concern with equitable practices in his relationship, occurs at the same time as he experiences macho, power-orientated and less equitable practices. Those conflicting practices are highlighted in the analysis of other subthemes such as ‘beyond romantic gestures’ where Pete wished to avoid being perceived as ‘a romantic’; ‘sex beyond the physical’ through which the position of male virility that Pete adopts is evident; ‘making a commitment’ where he wanted to present himself as independent, permissive and thus unlikely to commit; and ‘insecurity and jealousy’ through which Pete’s wish to maintain a sense of dominance and control in relation to his partner was shown.

In sum, the participants’ lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships included depictions of how such relationships broke down and/or ended. Participants saw the most significant features of romantic relationship deterioration and dissolution as including feelings of insecurity and jealousy, their partners’ possession and exertion of power over them, and inequity between partners in their efforts to maintain their relationships.

#### **4.5 Summary**

This section illustrated the main themes that emerged during the analysis. Participants identified their understanding of why romantic relationships were established, and the factors that contributed to the initial encounters, reflected in the first master theme, ‘initiating romantic relationships’. Participants also noted several elements they felt

were significant in sustaining their relationships, encapsulated in the master theme, 'maintaining romantic relationships'. Finally, participants identified a number of important factors that contributed to the break down and/or ending of romantic relationships which produced the third master theme, 'romantic relationship deterioration and dissolution'. In sum, the analysis demonstrates that this particular sample of White, British, well-educated, professionally employed, heterosexual men aged 30-39, appear to make sense of their experiences in ways that were varied, specific and complex.

## **5. Discussion**

This section summarises the findings of the study. The identified themes are presented in further detail and critically discussed in relation to extant literature including the researcher's positioning. This is followed by a discussion of issues on reflexivity and interpersonal processes, a critical evaluation of the methodology associated with the study, the study's contribution to counselling psychology, implications for practice, and directions for future research.

### **5.1. Summary of Findings**

This study aimed to explore a sample of heterosexual men's perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships. This was achieved by using IPA to analyse transcripts emanating from semi-structured interviews with seven participants. The analysis of the transcripts revealed three master themes: 'Initiating Romantic Relationships', 'Maintaining Romantic Relationships', and 'Romantic Relationship Deterioration and Dissolution'.

The study demonstrated that the initiation of romantic relationships was significant to the participants' lived experiences, and further revealed constituents of this process they considered important. In their accounts, two initiation themes were identified: 'Needing a Partner' and 'Attraction beyond the Physical'. The first theme related to the participants' personal need to have a partner in order to avoid feeling alone, and the perceived societal/cultural expectations which stressed the need to have a partner. The second theme concerned physical attraction, and included attraction beyond the physical domain which were seen as important factors contributing to the initial encounter between participants and their partners.

The maintenance of romantic relationships was also considered important to participants. Five significant maintenance themes were identified: 'Beyond Romantic Gestures', 'Sex Beyond the Physical', 'Making a Commitment', 'Acceptance of a Genuine Self from Partner and Others', and 'Retaining Autonomy'. These were considered the most significant features in maintaining their romantic relationships.

Finally, the study revealed that the process of deterioration and dissolution was understood by participants as an important aspect of their lived experiences of romantic relationships. In relation to this, three significant deterioration and dissolution themes were identified: 'Insecurity and Jealousy' which related to both partners whilst in the relationship, 'Dominant Women' which was about power that participants perceived their partners had over them, and 'Inequity Between Partners'. These factors were seen as the most significant contributions to the deterioration and dissolution of their romantic relationships.

## **5.2. Discussion of Findings in relation to Existing Literature**

The findings of this study appear to be consistent with, and therefore illuminate existing grand theories and prominent empirical findings in the literature on men and romantic relationships. However, the findings also appear to provide a more in-depth picture of men's perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships. The findings will now be discussed in further detail, and related to existing literature.

### ***5.2.1. Initiating Romantic Relationships***

In their accounts of lived experiences of romantic relationships, the participants discussed their understanding of the reasons for initiating such relationships. Some described a personal need for a partner which appeared to evolve from a struggle with

feelings of aloneness and vulnerability. This finding appears to share some common ground with Attachment Theory - an 'individual' explanation for men's behaviour in relationships which is underpinned by the assumption that infants possess an inborn behavioural system which promotes proximity to an attachment figure to ensure safety, and that separations from those attachment figures can cause heightened anxiety and distress – tendencies believed to be retained in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980).

Conversely, some participants' accounts also revealed that needing a female partner through a struggle with aloneness was undesirable to their sense of selves, presenting them in a vulnerable light. For those participants, there was a wish to maintain a sense of invulnerability and dominance even when this conflicted with their need for partnership. This wish seems related to the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity which views 'being male' as exclusively related to power and dominance, particularly over women (Connell, 1987, 1995). With this in mind, it could also be suggested that the participants' wish to present themselves in a dominant way may have been influenced by being interviewed by a female researcher. However, the analysis appears to portray practices which extended beyond Hegemonic Masculinity by showing that although these participants wished to present themselves as invulnerable and dominant in relation to female partners, they also simultaneously connected with a contradictory experience of diverse masculinity in which they acknowledged experiencing in the first instance vulnerability through their struggle with aloneness, and their need for their female partners. This appears to reveal a state of conflict indicating the complexity, specificity and variability of this particular sample of men's lived experiences.

Alternatively, participants perceived the presence of a social/cultural expectation that part of maturing involved having a partner. Although they did not explicitly describe



conforming to this particular expectation, they made a point of emphasising that they thought it existed and considered it as a potential pressure on them, influencing their need for a partner, leading to the initiation of romantic relationships. These findings seem consistent with Role Theory, a 'structural' explanation for masculinity which asserts that all social behaviour is socially prescribed and that current positions and expectations in society influence behaviour in relationships (Hargreaves & Colley, 1986; Risman & Schwartz, 1989; Winstead et al., 1997). However, since the participants recognised expectation placed on them but indicated non-conformity, these findings also appear to compound this theory by showing that social expectations can explain men's behaviour in relationships but perhaps not in its entirety. These findings thus further show that the way this sample of participants made sense of their experiences of initiating romantic relationships and needing partnership is subjective and varied.

Participants perceived the initiation of romantic relationships as involving physical attraction. They experienced this as a fundamental aspect of the initial encounter between themselves and their partners, describing it as the trigger and a way of connecting to partners. These findings seem to be supported by a substantial body of extant Evolutionary Psychology based positivist research which suggests that males have an evolved and inherited biological tendency to prefer partners/mates who are physically attractive, and that for men, physical attraction is the main cause of relationship initiation (e.g. Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Buss, 1989; Feingold, 1990; Rajecki et al., 1991; Thiessen et al., 1993; Wiederman, 1993; Kenrick et al., 1993).

However, the findings appear to go beyond this positivist research which seems to be based on the assumption that physical attractiveness is an objectively identifiable

category, understood by all men in a singular and unitary way. Participants perceived physical attractiveness as highly personal. This was echoed particularly by the account given by one participant who considered it as not a “generic beauty”. Furthermore, the findings of this study also appear to go beyond this positivist research which appears to assume that all men will have a fixed and universal experience of physical attraction as being the sole cause of relationship initiation. Some participants seemed to understand relationship initiation as involving attraction which exceeded the physical domain. Participants perceived genuine ‘inner’ qualities of a person as attractive such as nurturing qualities which mirrored the characteristics of their care-givers when they were children. For one participant in particular, it appeared that his nurturing childhood care-givers who created in him a sense of security and comfort provided a model to seek in his adult romantic relationship partners. This seems to be supported by previous Attachment Theory based research which suggests that men seek romantic relationships and partners that serve many of the same functions in adulthood that infant-caregivers and relationships served earlier in life (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Zeifman & Hazan, 2000). Moreover, some participants perceived commonalities between partners such as having similar interests to share, as attractive, and considered this important as it facilitated companionship and became the core or substance of a valuable relationship. This seems consistent with evidence showing that similarity is positively correlated with attraction and that similarity has many adaptive functions including facilitating initial encounters and dyadic interactions (e.g. Byrne, 1961, 1971; Herbst et al., 2003; Klohnen & Luo, 2003).

Thus, the findings appear to show that men’s understanding of physical attraction is something that cannot be pre-defined and is subjective and variable. They also seem to

show that physical attraction might not be experienced by all men in a fixed way as the sole cause of relationship initiation, but rather as one aspect among others. The findings seem to suggest that biology might partially explain men's behaviour and experiences in relationships but perhaps not entirely. The analysis therefore seems to emphasise the specific and varied ways in which this sample of participants made sense of their lived experiences of attraction in relationship initiation.

### ***5.2.2. Maintaining Romantic Relationships***

Previous research suggests that for men, performing romantic gestures is a significant strategy in relationship maintenance and consists of sending romantic cards, notes, making special telephone calls and buying gifts (Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia, 1994). This seems to support the findings of this study which revealed that these participants understood that performing romantic gestures for their partners functioned to maintain their romantic relationships. Participants thought romantic gestures could be conventional, simple acts such as buying flowers or chocolates, or could be a form which showed sentiment and demonstrated thought and effort. Participants went on to emphasise the importance and effectiveness of, as well as their preference for romantic gestures which showed meaning and demonstrated thought and effort. By identifying a wide range of romantic gestures which included the conventional, effortless and thoughtless, as well as the meaningful, thoughtful and effortful, participants illustrated the various ways in which doing romantic gestures were perceived and experienced. This seems to elaborate on existing positivist research which appears to straightforwardly assume that for all men, maintaining relationships entailed doing romantic gestures i.e. sending romantic cards, notes, making special telephone calls and buying gifts. The findings also show that

although participants saw performing personalised, unconventional romantic gestures as important to maintaining relationships, one participant in particular simultaneously described himself as less concerned with becoming involved in this aspect of romantic relationships. This seemed to illustrate his wish to avoid being perceived as ‘a romantic’, but rather as a dominant and ‘macho’ man. This wish seems related to the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity which views ‘being male’ as exclusively related to power and dominance (Connell, 1987, 1995). However, the analysis seems to show practices which extend beyond this concept by showing that although he wished to present himself in this way, he also connected with a contradictory experience of diverse masculinity in which he regarded performing personalised romantic gestures as significant to maintaining romantic relationships in the first instance. These findings appear to demonstrate a state of tension within this participant’s experience and thus show the complex, individual and diverse ways in which this sample of participants make sense of their lived experiences.

Previous research has consistently found that sexually satisfied men will report higher levels of overall relationship quality, satisfaction and maintenance (e.g. Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Edwards & Booth, 1994; Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Sprecher, 2002). This seems to support the findings of the current study as participants perceived sex as a significant feature of maintaining their romantic relationships. For one participant in particular, sex was seen as an essential factor for continuing relationships as it was a physical act that satisfied a bodily need. This also appears supported by previous research which has found that males place more importance on having sex for pure pleasure, physical gratification and to relieve sexual tension (e.g. Knox & Wilson, 1981; Sprecher, 1989; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Regan &

Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). For this particular participant understanding sex in this way seemed to show his wish to avoid presenting himself as in need of others or of intimacy, but driven by physiology and male virility which seems consistent with the ‘male sex drive discourse’ found by Hollway (1998) (see section 2.3.6). This also appears congruent with the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995). However, this participant appears to experience a dialectic state since these hegemonic practices seem to conflict with occasions when he connected with less macho practices. For example, he was one of the participants who regarded performing personalised romantic gestures which demonstrated thought and effort as significant to maintaining relationships. Thus, the findings emphasise the personal and intricate ways in which the men from this study make sense of their experiences of sex in romantic relationships.

The findings of the present study also appear to go beyond the extant positivist findings mentioned earlier which appear to be based on the assumption that all men will experience sex in romantic relationships in the ways suggested i.e. for pure pleasure, physical gratification and to relieve sexual tension. In the context of what the participants saw as contributing to the maintenance of romantic relationships, they described sex as being more than a physical act. Sex was seen as a kind of milestone which indicated, for one participant in particular, a “proper” and meaningful romantic relationship. Alternatively, other participants described sex as a valuable means of expressing how they felt about their partners, especially for those who described themselves as typically self-conscious and emotionally controlled in relation to their partners. These findings further highlight the subjective and extensive ways in which the participants made sense of sex in romantic relationships.

Participants' declared inclination to be emotionally controlled and inexpressive in relation to their partners seems to share some common ground with the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity, which claims that men's practices, particularly those regarding emotions are characterised by emotional detachment and male superiority in relation to women (Connell, 1987, 1995). With this in mind, the participants' wish to present themselves as emotionally controlled in relation to their female partners may have been exaggerated because they were being interviewed by a female. Nevertheless, since the participants simultaneously viewed their experience of sex in the maintenance of their relationships as an attempt to express feelings towards female partners, these findings also appear to compound this concept by showing that men's practices also connect with a contradictory experience of diverse masculinity where there is emotional expression and intimacy, as well as emotional control/detachment. This again emphasises the complex and individual ways in which the participants made sense of their lived experiences.

Variation in the way the participants made sense of sex in romantic relationships is further illustrated as the findings revealed that some participants viewed the Media as creating expectations about the nature of sex in maintaining romantic relationships. This in turn created pressure on men to conform. This finding seems to be supported by 'structural' explanations of men's behaviour in romantic relationships such as Role Theory (e.g. Hargreaves & Colley, 1986; Risman & Schwartz, 1989; Winstead et al., 1997). Although participants recognised the existence of social/cultural expectations about sex, they appeared to oppose these, considering them to be the cause of sex becoming impersonal and meaningless. This leads to a conclusion that in the context of maintaining their romantic relationships, rather than being a socially prescribed act, sex

is seen as personal and meaningful, further highlighting the variability of the meaning of sex. The participants' apparent willingness to depart from perceived social expectation appears to challenge Role Theory's claim that social expectations will influence all men's behaviour in relationships (e.g. Hargreaves & Colley, 1986; Risman & Schwartz, 1989; Winstead et al., 1997). The findings show that social expectations may partially explain men's behaviour and experiences in relationships, but perhaps not entirely, and thus reinforces the need to acknowledge the subjective nature of their experiences.

Participants viewed making a formal commitment i.e. getting engaged and marrying their partners a key factor in the maintenance of their romantic relationships. This appears supported by the Interdependence Theory based Investment Model which suggests that when men are committed they are more likely to remain in the relationship and engage in relationship maintenance behaviours - a process likely to be reciprocated when observed (Rusbult, 1983). This research seems to assume that experiences in relationships are solely influenced by the interactions *between* partners e.g. being committed. Nevertheless, the findings of this study appear to provide additional insights into this matter and show that this particular sample of men seem to make sense of making a commitment in very specific and varied ways. Some participants perceived the current social climate in which high rates of divorce are in evidence and accepted, as making it easier for commitment to be broken, thus influencing their view that commitment is a fragile and challenging process. This perhaps explains some of the participants' hesitance in initiating commitment. Such findings can lead to the conclusion that although the interactions between participants and partners can shape

the experience of romantic relationships, other aspects may also be relevant for example, societal factors.

The individual diverse and complex ways in which this group of men make sense of this aspect of romantic relationships is further demonstrated as one participant in particular believed that making a commitment enabled romantic relationships to continue, however, he simultaneously saw making a commitment as something he was unlikely to do himself. This seems to illustrate a state of conflict. Consistent with Connell's (1987, 1995) concept of Hegemonic Masculinity this participant's reluctance to commit to a partner seems to show his wish to present himself as an independent and permissive man. However, this is experienced at the same time as he exhibits less hegemonic practices when he regards making a commitment as highly significant to sustaining a relationship.

Alternatively, some of the participants saw their partners as typically the ones who initiated the making of any formal commitment. For one participant in particular, this created an uncomfortable pressure and urgency within him to comply. This analysis appears to extend the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995) in showing that rather than exhibiting practices exclusively related to having power over women, this participant connected with a diverse and contradictory experience where on this occasion his female partner's influential dominance seemed in evidence.

Furthermore, the specificity and complexity of this participant's experience appears to be illuminated since those less hegemonic practices occurred at the same time as he experienced practices that seemed more consistent with Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995). For example, this was one of the participants for whom to



maintain his relationship, needed independence to sustain a sense of dominance and machismo, as can be seen later in the discussion of the 'retaining autonomy' theme.

Illuminating again Role Theory (e.g. Hargreaves & Colley, 1986; Risman & Schwartz, 1989; Winstead et al., 1997) and further illustrating the personal and diverse ways in which the participants make sense of their experiences, some participants described making a formal commitment in romantic relationships as being a traditional social/cultural norm. However, the findings seem to extend Role Theory by showing that social expectations may partially explain men's experiences in relationships, but perhaps not entirely. These participants saw it as more important to make such commitment based on a personal wish brought about by feelings of enjoyment, love, and a genuine and reciprocal desire for partners to be together, instead of conformity to this social/cultural norm.

Participants perceived being open and genuine, and the acceptance of these principles by their partners and others as contributing to the maintenance of their relationships. They viewed these attributes as a means of sharing themselves with partners, and understood their partners' acceptance of these as contributing to closeness and intimacy leading to the maintenance of their relationships. These findings appear to be supported by empirical research which has found that for men, openness and self-disclosure enhance positive feelings between partners, intensifies experiences of intimacy, and is positively correlated with relationship satisfaction and maintenance (e.g. Hendrick, 1981; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia, 1994; Prager & Buhrmester, 1998). Research supporting these findings also suggest that for men, in maintaining a relationship, effective responses towards the discloser include those that convey acceptance, respect, and genuine caring about the

discloser, and what they are saying (e.g. Reis & Shaver, 1988; Dindia, 1994). This positivist research which seems to be based on the assumption that those conclusions are singular truths, and thus experienced and understood by men in a static and universal way seems to provide a useful basis to support these findings. However, the findings of this study also appear to provide a more subjective and detailed account of men's lived experiences, since participants described the acceptance of their openness and authenticity as being a *unique* experience, feeling such behaviour seldom occurred in others relationships, thereby creating an *exclusive* closeness with their partners which contributed to the maintenance of their relationships.

Participants also perceived being accepted by significant others such as their partners' friends and family as a valuable source of support and significant to the maintenance of their relationships. This seems to be consistent with extant literature which suggests that for men, social support aids romantic relationship longevity, and can be a more important predictor of positive outcomes (for individuals and the relationship) than are the specific supportive behaviours provided by partners (e.g. Lakey & Cassady, 1990; Cutrona, 1996).

The participants' experience of retaining autonomy was perceived as a significant factor of their romantic relationships, and was understood as contributing to the maintenance of these relationships. Participants understood 'togetherness' shared with their partners as something they needed and readily engaged in. However, some participants perceived 'complete togetherness' as consuming and thus an undesirable experience. This was seen as restrictive and involved the relinquishment of independence and control which they wished to retain. These findings seem to be supported by 'socialization' explanations of men's experiences in romantic relationships, such as

Chodorow's (1978, 1989) psychoanalytic/object relations based theory which suggests that since boys' identities were shaped apart from relationships and independently of others, as adults, men strive for a high degree of independence. These findings also seem to be supported by other empirical research which has defined both being together and seeking/allowing autonomy as relational maintenance strategies (e.g. Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Ragsdale, 1996).

However, the findings of the current study also appear to extend these conclusions. For one participant in particular, a lack of independence was seen as an undesirable sign of weakness and something to be pitied. Retaining autonomy was perceived as important in order to avoid this, and thereby maintain a sense of dominance which contributed to him remaining in the relationship. Furthermore, it was seen as something that was fundamental to this participant's well-being. The analysis thus shows that early relationships may explain men's relational behaviour (as Chodorow's (1978, 1989) theory suggests), but perhaps not in its entirety. It highlights the subjective and diverse ways in which the participants made sense of their experiences of retaining autonomy in romantic relationships.

The participants' experience of retaining autonomy to avoid feeling weak and thus maintain a sense of dominance in relation to their female partners seems consistent with the concept of Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995). However, the analysis seems to describe masculinity beyond this concept by showing that the participants also appeared to experience less hegemonic practices, demonstrated through their need for, and willingness to engage in 'togetherness' with their female partners. These findings seem to highlight another instance when the participants may experience a state of conflict. Furthermore, there also appears to be a dialectic between the participants' wish

to retain independence as shown here, and their simultaneous connection with alternative less hegemonic practices illustrated in the discussion of other subthemes, such as ‘needing a partner’ through which the participants’ need to be with someone and their struggle with aloneness seems evident. As a result, these findings further emphasise the individual, extensive, and complex ways in which the participants made sense of their lived experiences of retaining autonomy in the maintenance of relationships.

### ***5.2.3. Romantic Relationship Deterioration and Dissolution***

The participants perceived jealousy and insecurity as significant contributory features in the deterioration and dissolution of their romantic relationships. This appears to be supported by extant quantitative research which found that for men, jealousy and insecurity were the most prevalent and potentially destructive threats to romantic relationships (e.g. Widmer et al., 1998; Amato & Previti, 2003; Willets et al., 2004; Previti & Amato, 2004). However, the findings of this study show the specific and diverse ways in which jealousy and insecurity was understood by participants. They revealed that jealousy was experienced by one participant in particular as possessing an uncontainable, uncontrollable and overwhelming feeling. In his romantic relationships, this participant also experienced feeling a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, expressed as uncertainty about whether he was good enough for his partner.

Alternatively, some of the participants noted feelings of jealousy and insecurity emanating from their partners. They identified these as manifesting through their partners’ distrust in them, leading partners to become controlling over the things they did. This was echoed particularly by one participant who described his partner as ‘keeping tabs’ on him when he socialised without her. The jealousy, insecurity and

accompanied feelings of a lack of control were understood as contributing to the deterioration and dissolution of their romantic relationships.

These findings seem to imply that maintaining a sense of self-confidence and control particularly in relation to their female partners, is significant to these participants in their romantic relationships. These practices appear consistent with the concept of hegemonic masculinity where 'being male' is viewed as solely connected to superiority over women (Connell, 1987, 1995). In relation to this it could also be suggested that the presence of a female interviewer could have influenced these participants' responses, and the findings. However, the findings appear to go beyond the concept of hegemonic masculinity by showing that these participants' practices may not be entirely related to superiority over women, but may connect with a diverse masculinity as participants described experiencing self-insecurity, jealousy and a lack of control in the first instance. For these participants, 'being men' in romantic relationships seems to emerge again as a complex dialectic experience of attempting to live up to a model of masculinity as superiority and dominance over women, whilst also experiencing masculinity that is in tension and variable to this. The findings thus show further that this particular sample of men made sense of this aspect of their romantic relationships in complex and subjective ways.

In their experiences of romantic relationships the participants perceived their partners as sometimes possessing and exerting power and dominance over them, and suggested that this contributed to the deterioration and dissolution of their relationships. These findings appear to be supported by extant positivist research which concludes that for men, one of the most significant predictors of relationship deterioration and dissolution is the malevolent use of power and dominance between partners (e.g. Mason & Blackenship,

1987; Murphy & Cascardi, 1993; Marshall, 1994). Although such research provides some insight, the positivist assumption that such conclusions are singular and static ‘truths’ and apply universally to all men’s experiences of power in relationships, may not adequately account for the full breadth of the participants’ experiences. The findings of the current study seem to provide more detailed and subjective insights, emphasising that the way participants made sense of this aspect of romantic relationships is specific and varied. Some participants perceived their partners as possessing power over them by being overly confident. Other participants saw their partners as exerting dominance over them by possessing more freedom, being controlling, and pressurising them to change aspects of themselves. Consequently, these created in participants a sense of disempowerment, intimidation, weakness and lacking control in relation to their partners. They experienced these as difficult and undesirable to the extent that they led to the deterioration and dissolution of their romantic relationships.

The findings imply that for these participants it is important to maintain a sense of empowerment and control in relation to female partners in their relationships; a theme that again appears to relate to the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995). In relation to this, it is unclear what the effect of a female interviewer may have had on the participants’ responses. The specific and complex ways in which the participants made sense of their experiences is further highlighted as the findings show that whilst the participants seem to connect with hegemonic masculinity, they also experienced masculinity which was in conflict to this, demonstrated in the analysis of other themes. For example, whilst it was important for these participants to maintain a sense of empowerment and control in relation to their partners as shown here, they were

the same participants who also held a strong need for partnership and struggled when they were alone (illustrated in the 'needing a partner' theme).

In recalling their experiences of romantic relationships the participants described enduring occasions of inequity of effort exerted by partners in maintaining their relationships. This was seen as another contributory factor to the deterioration and dissolution of their relationships. For some participants on-going inequity was experienced as an arduous process and created negative feelings directed towards partners that exacerbated over time. These findings appear to be supported by positivist research from an Interdependence orientation which suggests that ongoing romantic relationships require that partners coordinate their actions (e.g. Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000; Reis & Rusbult, 2004). It also appears to be consistent with other quantitative research findings which conclude that inequity within a relationship de-motivates partners to maintain the relationship, thus causing it to break down; and that for men, inequitable relationships cause emotional turmoil directed toward the partner that in turn also work against their motivation to maintain the relationship, resulting in its deterioration or dissolution (e.g. Adams, 1965; Walster et al., 1973; Hatfield et al., 1979; Hatfield et al., 1985; Sprecher, 1986; Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994; Canary & Stafford, 1992).

Such positivist research seems to provide a basis of support for these findings, however, the analysis of the current study also appears to provide additional insights into this matter. Some participants perceived equitable efforts to maintain their relationships from themselves and their partners as fundamental. Consequently, they went on to describe inequity as detrimental, even affecting their sense of health and well-being as well as creating a meaningless relationship, not worth while, thus contributing to the

deterioration and dissolution of the relationship. These findings appear to reach beyond the underlying principle of the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1995) by showing that these participants connect with contradictory and diverse practices centred on equity with female partners. Conversely, it was not clear to what extent the role of the researcher may have impacted on the way the participants emphasised the inappropriateness of inequity between them and their partners. It is possible that participants wanted to present themselves in a favourable light where they were seen as respectful of common notions of gender equality, particularly given the interviewer's position as a woman. However, whilst these participants seem to connect with less hegemonic practices as shown here, they also seem to experience inequitable practices that are consistent with hegemonic masculinity demonstrated in the analysis of other themes. For example, the same participants needed to sustain independence in their relationships as a way of retaining a sense of control and superiority in relation to partners (illustrated in the 'retaining autonomy' theme). This shows a state of tension experienced by some of the participants of this study. These findings further show that this sample of men made sense of their experiences of inequity between partners in complex and subjective ways.

### **5.3. Reflexivity and Interpersonal Processes**

As discussed in section 3.6, qualitative research acknowledges that the researcher influences and shapes the research process, and so reflexivity is considered a significant criterion for quality evaluation in qualitative research (Willig, 2008). This encourages researchers to reflect upon the ways in which their prior experiences and preconceptions about the research area, and their subjective thoughts and feelings experienced throughout the research process, are implicated in the research and its findings (Willig



2008). Through reflexivity, interpretative-phenomenological researchers attempt to 'bracket' their customary ways of understanding a phenomenon (Husserl, 1970, 1982; Smith et al., 2009) as a way of getting as close as possible to the participants' perceptions and lived experiences, whilst also working with and using these in an attempt to advance understanding (Langdridge, 2007; Willig, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the aim of this section is to offer a reflection on the personal, interpersonal and epistemological factors that may have impacted on the present study.

In terms of personal reflexivity<sup>8</sup>, pre-existing literature in the field of men and romantic relationships will have influenced my overall interest in this area, as well as the research and interview questions, and the way I listened to and interpreted the data. For example, from my engagement with literature on men and romantic relationships, I learnt that relationships have been frequently studied and understood in terms of how they begin, continue and breakdown (e.g. Wood, 2000). It could be suggested that this previous knowledge partially influenced my interpretations and development of master themes.

On reflection, my own thoughts and feelings may have also impacted upon the process of deciding what literature I drew on, and left out in this study. I found the topics of men, masculinity and romantic relationships vast, and extensively studied areas in psychology, which was quite overwhelming. Feeling anxious about the possibility of excluding significant theory, I initially drew on huge amounts of literature. Following discussions with my supervisor and the work of Smith et al. (2009) on writing an IPA project, I was reminded that this study was a finite piece of work. I needed to use the literature concisely and critically in order to provide a flavour of the current state of

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<sup>8</sup> Personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs and social identities have shaped the research, and thinking about how the research may have affected the researcher (Willig, 2008).

research in this area and to identify a particular issue that my study aimed to address, rather than attempting to draw on *all* the literature I had initially engaged with.

Consequently, consistent themes/authors in the literature were drawn on while those that seemed less relevant were excluded. This exclusion was not to undermine its significance, but was a means of engaging with the literature in a selective rather than exhaustive way to produce a concise and finite piece of work.

It could also be suggested that my anxiety as a novice researcher also impacted on the way I approached this study, particularly the interviews and the analysis. This perhaps limited what I asked participants, and the interpretations I made. With further research experience I will be able to interview and analyse data at a more confident level.

At a deeper personal level, my own experiences of romantic relationships with men, and their importance to me, may have influenced my wish to further understand romantic relationships from a male perspective, and undertake this study. My preconception about men in romantic relationships was that they were misrepresented in the literature, and more generally in the wider social/cultural context (see section 1.1 for a more detailed account). Consequently, I felt that it was important to offer them an opportunity to express their own views and experiences without imposing any prior knowledge on the subject of men and romantic relationships. I aimed to empathically understand their experiences of romantic relationships and wanted to give them a voice through this study. It could be suggested that this facilitated the interview process, allowing participants to speak freely and provide detailed accounts.

The development of the interview schedule used for this project may have also been influenced by my own experiences of romantic relationships which have consisted of both good and bad elements. In turn, this may have influenced my formulation of the

questions in the interview schedule (see Appendix 4). On reflection, these questions may have been limited because simply asking participants what they considered were good or bad aspects of a romantic relationship may have been too general. They may not have enabled detailed accounts from each participant which emphasised adequately their *individual* lived experiences of romantic relationships, which was ultimately the aim of this project. To optimally address the research aim, it may have been useful to ask the participants questions that could have elicited responses which entailed more about the way romantic relationships were experienced *subjectively*. For example, I could have asked participants how they thought their experiences differed from other men, and from women; whether they thought their experiences changed over time, and if so, in what ways; what place romantic relationships have had in their lives previously, and what place those relationships hold in their lives at the moment; and whether they consider their romantic relationships to impact upon the way they see themselves, and if so, in what ways. This may have enabled the participants to tell their own personal stories in their own words, and allowed me to engage deeply with this to learn more about their individual lifeworlds. Overall, this may have achieved richer, nuanced accounts which emphasised more subjective experiences of romantic relationships, and would thus be staying as close as possible to addressing the research aim of the study.

Furthermore, my personal experiences and understanding of romantic relationships may have influenced the way I perceived and interpreted the data, and thus the findings of the study. My own identification with aspects of some participants' interview responses perhaps influenced me to draw on these, and develop particular themes. For example, I believe that making a commitment in my own relationship contributed to its longevity. This belief possibly influenced me to focus on the occasions when the participants

expressed similar beliefs, and may have led to the development of the ‘making a commitment’ subtheme within the ‘romantic relationship maintenance’ master theme. Nevertheless, to ensure research quality, theme development was regularly discussed with a research supervisor, who also checked the plausibility of the findings and that interpretations were prompted by the data.

Two significant factors that possibly impacted on the interview process and thus the findings were that I was female, and a doctoral researcher/trainee psychologist. As discussed in sections 2.3.5 and 2.3.5.1, Connell’s (1987, 1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity has been widely used in existing research on understanding men and masculinities (Demetriou, 2001; Whitehead, 2002; Seidler, 2006). Connell asserts that hegemonic masculinity is a set of male practices which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. This concept seemed to be related to the participants’ experiences of romantic relationships as discussed throughout section 5.2. For example, the subtheme relating to ‘dominant women’ nested within the ‘relationship deterioration and dissolution’ master theme seems to show that the perceived power possessed and exerted by female partners, caused undesirable feelings within participants leading them to end their relationships. This appeared to reveal the importance to these men, of retaining a sense of empowerment relative to female partners. On reflection, it is possible that my position as a female, as well as a doctoral researcher/trainee psychologist (which could be perceived as a position of expertise and authority), led participants to consciously present themselves in a more dominant way, consequently influencing their responses during the interviews and ultimately the findings of the study.

Opportunity sampling methods were employed in this study i.e. recruiting participants through one's own contacts. It is therefore possible that my position as a doctoral researcher/trainee psychologist contributed to me recruiting a sample of participants who shared a similar sociocultural position to myself i.e. university educated and employed in professional jobs. A limitation of this is that the sample could have been more diverse. Using a more stringent purposive sampling framework (e.g. recruiting one participant who was university educated, one who was not, one who was employed in a professional job, and one who was not) may have resulted in a more varied sample which could have allowed me to better address the aim of the study, and obtain more diverse, nuanced, and subjective accounts.

Since the search for understanding and meaning is central to counselling psychology philosophy in which the focus is upon engagement with subjective experience, values, and beliefs (Woolfe et al., 2003), I was influenced to position myself in critical realist and interpretative-phenomenological epistemology. Therefore, in terms of epistemological reflexivity<sup>9</sup>, I believe that my research aim, interview schedule, and subsequent analysis were also influenced by this stance. For instance, by using the term 'romantic relationship' in my research aim and interview schedule, I am assuming that such a phenomena exists, while accepting that the way people perceive and experience this phenomena depends partly upon their personal beliefs and expectations (Husserl, 1970, 1982; Bunge, 1993). I accept the view that different people perceive and experience what appears to be the 'same' phenomenon e.g. a romantic relationship in very different ways, and that varied interpretations of phenomena should be respected

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<sup>9</sup> Epistemological reflexivity encourages researchers to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world and about knowledge) they make in the course of the research and about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings (Willig, 2008).

and examined in its own terms (Heidegger, 1962/1927; Husserl, 1970, 1982).

Consequently, the accounts given by participants and the overall findings of this study are understood as subjective interpretations of men's perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships. Additionally, although the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience of the participant, the end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking (referred to as the 'double hermeneutic') (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, the analysis of the current study is not given the status of 'facts', but are always tentative, and I thus accept that alternative interpretations are equally valid, but do not necessarily invalidate the findings of this study.

Overall, the research has mainly influenced my way of thinking and practicing as a counselling psychologist in training, by reminding me to emphasise the role of subjective understanding and experience. This research has also strengthened my interest in the topic under investigation, and encouraged me to undertake future research.

#### **5.4. Critical Evaluation of Methodology**

Some of the methodological strengths of the present study include how the validity and quality of the research was assessed. As discussed in section 3.5, Yardley's (2000, 2008) criteria and Yin's (1989) Independent Audit guidelines were followed throughout the research process. This involved ensuring that there was a clear 'paper trail' forcing the researcher to check the rigour of their claims, and having peer and supervisory teams who checked the plausibility of the data collected, the analysis, and the overall research write-up. Furthermore, a reflexive journal was kept during the research process, and reflexivity issues have been considered. Moreover, following Smith et

als', (2009) criteria for validity in IPA analysis, the researcher ensured that interpretations were prompted by the data.

There are also several points to consider in relation to the methodological limitations of the present study. First, due to IPA's idiographic concern (Smith et al., 2009) a relatively small number of participants were used in this study in order to enable the detailed examination of each participant's particular case. The detailed examination of a small number of individual cases enables a rich, nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the data which conveys a sense of quality and texture (Smith et al., 2009). In terms of the transferability of findings in qualitative research more generally, Willig (2008) argued that small sample sizes often mean that the research findings cannot be widely generalised, thus, immediate claims made are bounded by the group studied. Therefore, although the findings of the current study say something about the experiences of romantic relationships for this particular group of men, they cannot be generalised to the wider population of heterosexual men, aged 30-39. However, Willig (2008) also noted that although it is uncertain who or how many other individuals share the experience borne from qualitative studies using small sample sizes, their findings show that a particular experience is nevertheless available within a particular culture and society, and can thus facilitate the development of further research. Furthermore, as opposed to empirical generalisability, in IPA it is possible to think in terms of theoretical transferability, as links have been made between the analysis and the claims in the extant literature (Smith et al., 2009). Here, the effectiveness of the IPA study is judged by the light it sheds within this broader context (Smith et al., 2009).

Second, semi-structured interviews were employed as the method of data collection in which an interview schedule is used to facilitate the in-depth exploration of the

participants' salient issues. However, there seem to be some limitations with using semi-structured interviews and interview schedules too rigidly. This may have restricted the participant in elaborating further their responses to the questions asked. A future consideration would be to put emphasis on the *flexible* use of semi-structured interviews. This involves ensuring that any interesting points expressed by the participant which are relevant to the research aim but which diverge from the interview schedule are followed up. This would facilitate the participant to speak more freely about their experiences without being overly influenced by the interviewer, allowing for a richer and more detailed account. This is also congruent with IPA which views the participant as the experiential expert (Smith et al., 2009).

Third, since IPA works with data typically collected from semi-structured interviews (Smith et al., 2009), it implies that language is the means by which participants communicate their experiences to the researcher (Willig, 2008). Thus, IPA's interest in the actual experience itself is based on the assumption that language provides participants with the necessary tools to capture that experience (Smith et al., 2009). However, it has been argued, typically from constructionist positions, that language constructs rather than describes reality (e.g. Burr, 2003). From this perspective, an interview transcript tells researchers more about the ways in which an individual talks about a particular experience within a particular context (or the performative and functional nature of language), than about the experience itself (Burr, 2003; Willig, 2008). An approach such as DP would be most concerned with this matter (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Alternatively, it has been argued that the availability of a particular way of talking about an issue provides the experience, and that consequently language precedes and therefore shapes experience (Willig, 2008). From this perspective,



language is not simply a vehicle for expressing experience; rather, language prescribes what people *can* experience (Willig, 2008). An approach such as FDA would typically be concerned with this matter (Willig, 2008).

In contrast, IPA is concerned with cognition, or what particular people think or believe about the topic under discussion (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009). It is compatible with a social cognition paradigm as it believes in, and is concerned with, the connection between verbal report, thoughts and feelings (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). From this perspective, understanding a person's cognitions should allow researchers to make sense of their experiences (Willig, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). However, it has been argued that an emphasis upon cognition is not compatible with some aspects of phenomenology (Willig, 2008). For example, some phenomenologists challenge the object/subject distinction implied by cognitive theory, and aim to transcend the separation between 'person' and 'world' (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, IPA is open to questioning because it uses the term 'cognition' to refer to the subjective quality of experience (Willig, 2008). Consequently, Smith & Eatough (2006) highlight that the role of cognition in phenomenological research requires further exploration.

A final methodological limitation is concerned with the suitability of accounts. IPA attempts to explore and capture the quality of lived experience by relying on participants to provide experiential descriptions of rich texture (Smith et al., 2009). It has been argued however that accounts provided by those who may not be able to articulate their experiences this way are not suitable for IPA (Willig, 2008).

Nevertheless, IPA recognises that participants will express themselves in a variety of ways, some finding it more difficult than others (Smith et al., 2009). This seemed to be the case for some of the participants of this study. Consequently, interviewing in open,

exploratory and creative ways in order to encourage and facilitate the participant was considered in this study, and is a salient point for future research. Additionally, through a hermeneutics of ‘questioning’, the IPA researcher can interpret the participants’ accounts from a different angle which may contribute to gathering richer insights on the topic under discussion, that the participant may have been unable to articulate themselves (Smith, 2004; Larkin et al, 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

### **5.5. Contribution to Counselling Psychology**

The present study provides an in-depth view of men’s lived experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships. This seems highly relevant to counselling psychology which views close relationships (including romantic relationships) as considerably significant in most people’s lives (Woolfe et al., 2003). This is a topic that frequently arises in theory and practice (Woolfe et al., 2003). A detailed exploration of men’s understanding and experiences of romantic relationships is of further interest to counselling psychology which believes that close relationships of this type exert a powerful impact on human psychological health and well-being, and influence much of an individual’s personal view of the ‘self’ (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Woolfe et al., 2003).

The findings that have emerged from this study show the complex, specific and varied ways in which the participants made sense of their romantic relationships, and have thus enabled the development of new and richer insights into the area of men and romantic relationships. The findings therefore make a significant contribution to counselling psychology theory by complimenting, but also enhancing existing literature in this area. These insights emphasise the validity of, and need to respect and understand in its own terms, people’s personal meanings and experiences. This seems to be a worthy contribution to counselling psychology which places the search for understanding and

meaning in a primary position in psychology, in which the focus is upon an engagement with subjective experience, values and beliefs (Woolfe et al., 2003). Finally, the insights from this study can make a distinctive contribution to counselling psychology by opening up new directions for future research (presented in section 5.7).

## **5.6. Implications for Practice**

The current study seems highly relevant to counselling psychology practice given that there is an increase of male therapy clients more generally (Brooks & Good, 2001). More specifically, there is a significant number of individuals seeking counselling to address issues rooted in their close relationships (McLeod, 2003a), and there is currently a rise specifically in male clients accessing psychological help with regards to relationship issues (Relate, 2009, 2010). Consequently, this study may provide new insights and enhanced understanding of men and romantic relationships for agencies devoted to working specifically with male clients with relationship issues.

The findings of this study demonstrate that this sample of men can make sense of their romantic relationships in subjective, varied and complex ways. This reminds both qualified and trainee counselling psychologists that in practice, their engagement with clients should be collaborative where they seek to understand the clients' inner worlds and constructions of reality, whilst emphasising and respecting in its own terms their subjective experiences, feelings and meanings – fundamental components of counselling psychology philosophy (Woolfe et al., 2003).

The findings of this study appear to complement but also enhance existing literature in the area of men and romantic relationships, and can remind counselling psychologists that extant theories and research can partially facilitate their understanding in this field,

but may not account for everything. Counselling psychologists are thus encouraged not to 'fit' their clients' experiences into pre-existing theories and categories of meaning. Rather, they are challenged to elucidate, interpret and negotiate between personal perceptions and existing knowledge, and not to assume the superiority of any one way of experiencing or knowing – also essential to counselling psychology philosophy (Woolfe et al., 2003).

The findings of this study appear to show that in their relationships, men may experience a state of conflict between maintaining a sense of dominance, whilst also encountering feelings of disempowerment, in relation to women. This reminds counselling psychologists that in practice the complexity of men's lived experiences should be fully understood and respected in its own terms. This also highlights the need to be aware that some men may be attempting to live up to specific models of masculinity i.e. masculinity as dominance, which may influence and limit what they disclose in therapy. Consequently, counselling psychologists in practice are challenged to readily invite in-depth discussion and exploration of the subjective experiences and perceptions of romantic relationships with male clients.

In sum, when counselling psychologists work with male clients, they are encouraged to be more curious about how men personally experience romantic relationships. This study reminds counselling psychologists that they should invite their male clients more often into the role of making meaning of their own experiences, which entails offering respect for the ways in which their personal beliefs and values, as well as wider social/cultural factors may be involved in this, rather than interpreting their experience to fit with existing theory. In doing so, counselling psychologists will be working congruently with their philosophy which views the client and therapist engagement as a

meeting of equals in which their work is centred on ‘being with’ the client, rather than ‘doing something to’ them (Woolfe et al., 2003).

### **5.7. New Directions for Future Research**

This study appears to point the way for future research, including IPA studies that focus on and explore in greater depths how each identified master theme and subtheme of the present study is perceived and experienced by men in the context of romantic relationships. For example, a future study could focus on exploring men’s perception and lived experience of initiating romantic relationships, or men’s understanding and experience of sex in romantic relationships.

Since the concept of hegemonic masculinity seems to be frequently related to the participants’ perceptions and experiences of romantic relationships, it could also be interesting to explore in much further detail men’s heterosexual romantic relationships and the role of male power. This could possibly be done using a research approach such as Discursive Psychology, which focuses on how an individual talks about a particular experience within a particular context (or the performative and functional nature of language), and/or Foucauldian Discourse Analysis which aims to produce knowledge about the availability of a particular way of talking about an issue, how it got to be this way (historically), and what this means for individuals (for their sense of self, subjectivity, experiences) (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2008).

IPA studies exploring the perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships from each member of a couple could also be a new direction for future research, as it could be interesting to explore and illuminate the internal experiences of both parties.

Since some wider contextual factors such as social expectations and the Media were shown to be involved in the participants' experiences, it might also be interesting to devise IPA studies to examine in further detail, men's perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships in relation to these. For example, it could be interesting to investigate in detail the ways in which the representation of men in romantic relationships in the media, affects men. Additionally, the relationship between wider social/cultural contextual factors and men and romantic relationships might also be explored in-depth using a Discursive Psychology and/or Foucauldian Discourse Analysis approach.

It would also be worth implementing IPA studies to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships from the perspective of other male groups including gay men, fathers or adolescents, and of different types of relationships such as male friendships.

## **5.8. Summary and Conclusions**

This study aimed to explore heterosexual men's personal perceptions and lived experiences of romantic relationships. The findings suggest that for the seven participants who were interviewed, romantic relationships were understood and experienced in terms of how they emerged (relationship initiation), continued (relationship maintenance), and broke down or ended (relationship deterioration and dissolution). This qualitative study using IPA appears to provide a distinctive contribution to the wider field of relationship research more generally, by adding to the growing number of non-positivist research which is still in its minority (Allen & Walker, 2000; Woolfe et al., 2003). More specifically, the findings that have emerged from this study show that men can make sense of their romantic relationships in

complex, specific and varied ways, and have enabled the development of new and richer insights into the area of men and romantic relationships. This seems to both complement and enhance existing literature in this area. This study also appears to highlight that extant theories and research can partially facilitate understanding in this field but may not account for everything. These insights appear to emphasise the need to acknowledge and fully understand men's/people's subjective experiences and personal perceptions. This makes a significant contribution to counselling psychology which emphasises the need to elucidate, interpret and negotiate between personal perceptions and existing knowledge, without assuming the superiority of any one way of experiencing or knowing, and places subjective experiences, feelings and meanings in a primary position (Woolfe et al., 2003).

The findings of this study can become part of the literature that informs and enhances counselling psychologists' understanding, which in turn can facilitate their practice. This research can contribute to both trainee and qualified counselling psychologists' practice by encouraging them to reflect on, and adapt their own practice when working with male clients and relationship issues. Furthermore, it appears to provide new insights and enhanced understanding of men and romantic relationships for agencies devoted to working specifically with clients/couples with relationship issues. Finally, this study provides a distinctive contribution to counselling psychology and relationship theory by generating several new directions for future research.

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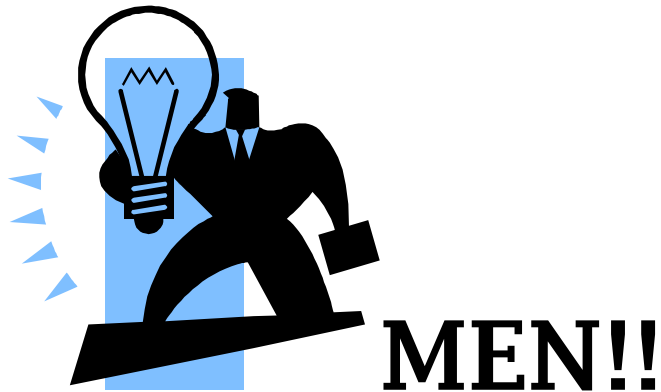
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Fancy participating in a piece of psychological research about

## ***YOU... AND WOMEN!?!***

Well... I'm holding interviews to hear about your experiences of  
Romantic Relationships

*So, if you're a:*

- ***Heterosexual male, aged 30-39, and consider yourself to have had past and/or present experience of a romantic relationship, are fluent in the English language, and willing to talk about your experience of a romantic relationship, please contact me.***
- ***Interviews only take about an hour***
- ***They'll be held either at the University of East London OR in a location convenient for you***
- ***Confidentiality is assured***
- ***You may elect to withdraw from the study at any time***

For further information, feel free to contact:

***Joanne Da Silva (Counselling Psychologist in Training – University of East London)***  
***on:***

***Telephone: \*\*\****

***Email: \*\*\****

***University of East London***

***School of Psychology***

***Romford Road***

***London***

***E15 4LZ    Tel: 020 8223 4937***

## Appendix 2: Consent Form

### **Introduction**

You are being invited to participate in a research study entitled: Men's Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Romantic Relationships: A Qualitative Approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This study is being conducted by Joanne Da Silva under the supervision of Dr. Kendra Gilbert in the School of Psychology at the University of East London.

### **Volunteer status and confidentiality**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Confidentiality is assured in all published and written data resulting from the study. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. You may elect to withdraw from this study at any time and the information I have collected from you will be destroyed. If you decide to participate, the information you provide will be used only for the completion of this study.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study will be to explore men's lived experience and personal perceptions of romantic relationships.

### **Procedure**

Participants will be individually interviewed about their experiences of a romantic relationship by Joanne Da Silva. These face-to-face interviews will be held in the interview rooms at the University of East London.

Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by Joanne Da Silva.

Participants will be fully debriefed at the end of their interview.

### **Time Commitment**

Your participation in this study will take approximately 60 minutes for the interview.

### **Risks**

There are no known risks to participating in this research.

### **Benefits**

This study intends to help me and others fully understand men's lived experiences and personal perceptions of romantic relationships in order to illuminate and enhance existing literature in this field which may in turn support the practice of clinicians working with men and relationship issues.

### **Payment:**

You will not be paid for participating in the study.

### **Ethical clearance:**

This study has received ethical clearance from the School of Psychology ethics committee at the University of East London.

**For Further Information**

Any questions that you may have about this study can be answered by Joanne Da Silva.

Email: \*\*\*

Or contact:

University of East London

School of Psychology

Romford Road

London

E15 4LZ

020 8223 4937

**Before You Sign This Document**

By signing below, you are agreeing to participate in the research study. Be sure that any questions have been answered to your satisfaction and that you have a thorough understanding of the study. If you have further questions that come up later, please feel free to ask the researcher. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you.

Print name:

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

### Appendix 3: Debrief Form

#### ***Thank you for participating in my study***

May I remind you that your participation in this study was completely voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity is assured in all published and written data resulting from the study. The information you have provided will be used only for the completion of this study.

#### **Purpose of research**

I have asked you about your experience in romantic relationships because this area appears to be a well-researched and essential part of counselling psychologist's theory and practice. Therefore, I was interested to see how men in particular, understand and experience romantic relationships differently, to possibly help other counselling psychologists fully understand this area.

If you are interested in finding out more about this, there is literature in:

Wolfe, R., Dryden, W., & Strawbridge, S. (2003). *Handbook of Counselling Psychology*. London: Sage

Winstead, Derlega & Rose (1997). *Gender and Close Relationships*. London: Sage

#### **Procedure**

Participants were individually interviewed about their experiences of romantic relationships by Joanne Da Silva. Face-to-face interviews were held in the interview rooms at the University of East London.

Interviews were recorded, and will be transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis by Joanne Da Silva. Participants are fully debriefed at the end of their interview.

**If you were upset, disturbed or distressed by participation in this study or found out information about yourself that is upsetting, disturbing, or distressing, we encourage you to make contact with one of the following agencies:**

RELATE (Central Office): 0300 100 1234 or [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

The Samaritans: 08457 90 90 90 or [www.samaritians.org](http://www.samaritians.org)

**Also, if you have any questions or concerns about this study, you are encouraged to contact**

**Joanne Da Silva: \*\*\***

**Or contact:** University of East London  
School of Psychology  
Romford Road  
London  
E15 4LZ

020 8223 4937

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you once again for your participation.

#### Appendix 4: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

##### Possible Questions:

1. What is your understanding of a romantic relationship? Or, if I were someone who knew nothing about a romantic relationship, how would you describe it to me? Or, how do you know you're in a romantic relationship?
2. What do you consider as bad aspects of a romantic relationship? Or, what do you consider to make a bad/unsuccessful romantic relationship? Or, what is not needed in your romantic relationship?
3. What do you consider as good aspects of a romantic relationship? Or, what do you consider to make a good/successful romantic relationship? Or, what is needed in your romantic relationship?
4. Can you tell me about your own experience of a romantic relationship?

##### Possible Prompts and Probes:

Can you tell me more about that?

Can you give me an example of what you mean?

What do you mean?

What was that like for you? Or, how did that make you feel?

How do/did you know?

Is there anything else that you might like to add?

What makes you say that?

What happened?

## Appendix 5: Searching for Connections across Emergent Themes

Smith et al. (2009) suggested that the following specific strategies could be used to look for patterns and connections between emergent themes. They proposed however that these are not prescriptive, and researchers should be innovative.

**Abstraction:** Putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster.

**Subsumption:** This is similar to abstraction but operates where an emergent theme itself requires a super-ordinate status as it helps to bring together a series of related themes.

**Polarization:** Examining transcripts for the oppositional relationships between emergent themes by focusing upon difference instead of similarity.

**Contextualisation:** Because a transcript is shaped by the participant's narrative, it may be useful to highlight constellations of emergent themes which relate to particular narrative moments.

**Numeration:** Taking account of the frequency with which a theme is supported.

**Function:** Emergent themes can be examined for their specific function within the transcript. For example, by organising themes by their positive and negative presentation may be interpreted beyond what the participant presents in terms of their meaning, and rather as a distinct way of presenting the self within the interview. This enables a deeper interpretation of the data.

## Appendix 6: Master Table of Themes for the Group

<b>Master Theme: Initiating Romantic Relationships</b>		
<b>Sub Theme: Needing a Partner</b>		
Anthony	In a way it's sort of a bit selfish but I like to have my girlfriend because it's nice to be with somebody	215-217
Mike	There was not much time to talk to each other but the good things about it were that you could, you could just talk to somebody	186-189
Andrew	when you obviously get a little bit older, may be like your parents are saying, oh isn't it about time you got a girlfriend	782-784
Pete	going on that journey through life together, you know it's, ah it's always better when you're with someone else.	299-301
<b>Sub Theme: Attraction Beyond the Physical</b>		
Tom	it's [physical beauty] not a generic beauty but there's just something there that is, ahh I dunno an individual thing.	280-282
Pete	I think I've always found ah, people who are kind of kind to be ah, very ah, yeah, there's like kinda warmth there which you know, is attractive	453-455
Simon	Romantic relationship. (Pause) Two people, being together, who enjoy doing the same things, mainly. That's what I look for.	17-19
Andrew	we met when I worked in the company... we just started having the most random conversations about, it was X-Men of all things. X-Men cartoons when we were young.	33-41
Anthony	I think you've got to both want the same things out of life.	558-559
Mike	it was the first time that I met her that something clicked	336-337
<b>Master Theme: Maintaining Romantic Relationships</b>		
<b>Sub Theme: Beyond Romantic Gestures</b>		
Mike	I'd do romantic things as well, you know, cooking them dinner for one night, just for the hell of it, umm bringing flowers home for no reason, leaving little surprises	679-683
Pete	I think I prefer more ah, personalised ah, romantic gestures	20-21
Lee	you could put it more generally by just buying flowers and that sort of thing, but yeh you know, it's a bit more than that	11-14

Sub Theme: Sex Beyond the Physical		
Pete	there's the physical aspect, you know, it's important for me to be attracted to, you know, the person really, umm, and that we have ah, a good physical relationship	482-485
Tom	you start like, yeah, developing a sexual relationship... you're in a proper relationship	20-24
Anthony	the sex life has got to be good... It's your way of showing each other how you feel.	508-517
Andrew	the amount of stuff that's written in like girls magazines and stuff like that, as to how to keep a relationship successful... they'll put something in there about... top ten like sex tips	714-728
Simon	I've always said that if it's right in the bedroom it's right everywhere else.	266-267
Lee	your sex life comes into it as well. Umm, make them feel special in that way	99-100
Sub Theme: Making a Commitment		
Pete	commitment phobia is not conducive to ah, a romantic relationship (laughs). You know, it gets in the way.	389-391
Lee	she got to a point where it was like, you know where are we going and stuff, I mean, I'm sure she would have said at some point, about you know, with getting engaged	623-626
Simon	she wanted to get married and have kids at an early age, which I thought was like a small town mentality from where I was from	223-226
Mike	you need to be umm on some level committed to the relationship	463-464
Anthony	being engaged to be married erm I've actually made a conscious decision to try and make it work	491-493
Andrew	everyone seems to say that after you've got married and whatever else, it all goes downhill from there... but, again I think that's, I can't see why, why that would be the case	833-840
Sub Theme: Acceptance of a Genuine Self from Partner and Others		
Pete	feeling comfortable so you can just be yourself you know, umm, ah, yeah, that's important	269-271



Anthony	I think you've got to be able to like I can be really stupid with my girlfriend	194-196
Andrew	the relationship should be between me and her, but I think it's hard not to factor in whatever else she brings with her. And if that's, and obviously that includes her family.	515-518
Lee	if I didn't get on with her parents, you know, we'd have to have a really strong relationship with just the pair of us, for us to probably stay together	258-261
Simon	if I start going out with someone, it starts there, I'm not bothered about what they've done in the past like relationship wise or anything. I take it from there, move, keep going.	136-139
<b>Sub Theme: Retaining Autonomy</b>		
Lee	it gets to the point where it's like yeah I need a bit, just chill out Lee time, to do what I wanna do	594-596
Anthony	I think to make a good relationship you have to have your own space otherwise you end up too clingy with each other	129-132
Tom	Things that make an unsuccessful relationship. Ahh [PAUSE] not being able to understand your partners outside of your relationship.	461-464
Simon	I still like that little bit of freedom	575-576
Pete	I'm someone who's fairly self-contained in way. I mean, I can function fairly well on my own	287-289
Andrew	she knows I need, it's unhealthy to only see each other	342-343
<b>Master Theme: Romantic Relationship Deterioration and Dissolution</b>		
<b>Sub Theme: Insecurity and Jealousy</b>		
Andrew	constantly wondering whether I'd measure up in more ways than one (laughs) to whatever her previous relationship was	120-122
Pete	I think insecurity is a big factor, you know if, if, someone's not feeling very secure in a relationship then that's gonna show itself in, numerous ways	314-316
Lee	she's yeah, quite insecure, so obviously she thinks that something's gone on... but yeah definitely, that's another big thing where people in a bad relationship	685-689

Mike	they're so much more insecure, umm they're so much more defensive, you know, you can see that when I've met girls and they haven't, you know, they've had bad relationships, umm it affects them massively	659-663
Simon	I don't expect to be accused of doing something I shouldn't been doing. Or getting asked questions around that when I would never do that	630-633
Sub Theme: Dominant Women		
Mike	there's been a lot more powerful women, which is good and bad... But it is bad in that women have got a lot more, maybe a bit too confident	567-575
Anthony	Men do find that they have to warm their girlfriends before they can say 'Right I'm going out tonight'	347-349
Simon	if I wanted to go out for a drink with the lads they're not happy with me going out for a drink	557-559
Andrew	one of my friends umm girlfriends is... just a bit of a ladette... but, I just think oh my god if you ever, if you behaved like that and you were my girlfriend... I might be a little bit ashamed	613-618
Sub Theme: Inequity Between Partners		
Lee	if it's one person doing all the running then, eventually they're gonna get a bit annoyed about that	481-482
Tom	if you've got one person who's constantly demanding and the other person who's constantly giving... I think it's the first step where you start developing negative feelings which will just grow and grow	447-455
Pete	if I'm gonna spend some time with someone, I'd like it to be in a balanced, you know, mutual, mutually ah, fulfilling relationship	615-618
Mike	a lack of respect for each other... not appreciating that the other one is maybe umm working harder than you are at making it work	712-719

## Appendix 7: Letter of Ethical Approval

### EXTERNAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

uel.ac.uk/qa

Quality Assurance and Enhancement



MISS JOANNE DA SILVA

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LONDON

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Date: 13 April 2011

Dear Joanne,

I am writing on behalf of University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) to provide formal confirmation of the registration of your amended thesis title as below:

***Men's Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Romantic Relationships:  
A Qualitative Approach using Interpretative Phenomenological  
Analysis***

Should any further significant adverse events or considerable changes occur in connection with this research project that may consequently alter relevant ethical considerations, this must be reported immediately to UREC. Subsequent to such changes an Ethical Amendment Form should be completed and submitted to UREC.

Approval is given on the understanding that the 'UEL Code of Good Practice in Research' ([www.uel.ac.uk/qa/manual/documents/codeofgoodpracticeinresearch.doc](http://www.uel.ac.uk/qa/manual/documents/codeofgoodpracticeinresearch.doc)) is adhered to.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Merlin Harries'.

Merlin Harries  
University Research Ethics Committee  
Email: [m.harries@uel.ac.uk](mailto:m.harries@uel.ac.uk)